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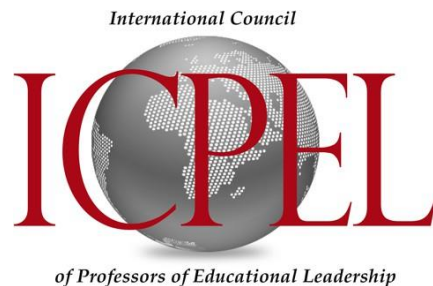
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These manuscripts have been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the International Council of Professors of Educational Leadership as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of school leadership and k-12 education.

From the Editors

Kelly Brown, Noni Mendoza-Reis, and Robert A. Martin

Nurturing Justice: The Power of Mentorship in Shaping a Just Society

“The reality is this: If we don’t make time to close our eyes, breathe deeply, push beyond the binds we’re in, and visualize a day when they don’t exist, we can never truly be free.”

~Akiba Solomon & Kenrya Rankin

In an era where the term 'unprecedented' echoes through discussions of societal challenges, the persistent erosion of universal rights and the amplification of selective voices dominate the discourse. While oppressive policies, laws, court rulings, and actions by a privileged few continually push boundaries, it is crucial to recognize that such struggles are far from unprecedented. History illustrates the systematic targeting and marginalization of specific classes and races, revealing a recurring pattern of societal inequities. However, in the face of such adversity, the voices of the oppressed persist, acting as a powerful countermeasure against the weapon of silence.

Questions: Why is a special issue dedicated to emerging Social Justice issues? Why now?
Answer: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives need help to survive across the USA and receive vicious and misinformed attacks from political factions. Now is precisely the time when the Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (JEDI) committee within the International Council for Professors of Educational Leadership (ICPEL) needs to take a public position in this debate, despite and especially if it means facing pushback. There are times when organizations and individuals need to take a stand and face the consequences.

Silence, often wielded as a tool of oppression, matches the resounding voices of freedom fighters. Yet, as we navigate these challenging times, a call arises for the elders and scholars of today to assume the mantle of mentors, guiding and empowering a new generation to persist in the pursuit of justice.

Mentorship emerges as a potent tool, facilitating the transmission of wisdom from one generation to the next. It fosters an environment where individuals are inspired to leverage their unique talents to improve society. Mentorship becomes not just a passing of knowledge but a path guiding emerging leaders on a journey of growth and resilience.

The editors extend their sincere gratitude to the International Council for Educational Leadership (ICPEL), the Committee for Justice Equity Diversity and Inclusion (JEDI), and the editors of the journal Educational Leadership Review (ELR) for their support of this transformative project. The editors envisioned a safe space for new and first-generation social justice scholars to express their passion, receive constructive feedback, access mentorship, begin their career aspirations, and acquire skills to impart to future generations.

This was a layered-mentoring model from the expertise of the editors to the mentors who supported the emerging scholars in their efforts. The editorial team for this special issue of *Ed Leadership Review* was comprised of three guest editors

Dr. Kelly Brown is a dedicated member of the Texas Council for Professors of Educational Administrators (TCPEA), which serves as the Texas state affiliate of the International Council of Professors of Educational Leadership (ICPEL). She has held a position on the TCPEA board and has been recognized for her outstanding contributions to the field, receiving both the Advocate of the Year and Researcher of the Year awards from the organization. Dr. Brown is particularly passionate about supporting emerging researchers, especially those who identify as historically marginalized. While she is committed to mentoring these individuals, she is also invested in her own learning and growth, continuously enhancing her skillset to further her impact in the field. As such, she eagerly embraced the opportunity to learn how to lead and edit a special issue, exemplifying her belief in layered mentoring.

Her participation in this journal is significant to her, as it reflects her dedication to fostering dialogue and sharing knowledge within the educational research community. Dr. Brown aims to highlight the importance of inclusive research that addresses the needs of underrepresented groups, inspiring a new generation of researchers to pursue innovative studies that promote social justice in education. Ultimately, she envisions a future where educational leadership is inclusive and representative of the diverse populations it serves, advocating for policies and practices that empower marginalized voices to ensure all students have access to quality resources and support.

Dr. Noni Mendoza Reis, Professor Emerita, Department of Educational Leadership at San Jose State University, represented the California Association of Professors of Educational Leadership (CAPEA) on the editorial team for this special issue of *Ed Leadership Review*. Dr. Reis served as President of CAPEA in 2018-2019. She has been a member of the editorial team for the CAPEA journal *Educational Leadership and Administration: Teaching and Program Development* since 2013. Dr. Reis is guest editor for a Winter 2025 special issue of *Curriculum, Pedagogy and Inquiry, University of Toronto*.

Dr. Robert A. Martin, Special Instructor, Department of Organizational Leadership at Oakland University (OU). After serving 38 years in preK-12 education, he now coordinates the Masters of Education in Educational Leadership and teaches in the doctoral and Central Office Certification programs at OU. Dr. Martin served as Project Director for the Leaders Investing in Future Teachers (LIFT) Fellowship, a Department of Education's Teacher Quality Program (TQP) grant at Wayne State University. Dr. Martin has authored one chapter and co-authored another in the recent publication *The Palgrave Handbook of Anti-Racism in Human Resources*.

Integral to this endeavor are the social justice mentors and the scholars who embarked on the impactful research presented in this collection. Their commitment to rigorous research, dedication to their craft, and selfless commitment to aiding others form the bedrock of our collective journey toward a more equitable and just society. We hope each scholar will continue their research, disseminate its findings widely, and document its impact on society. Through

this journey, they will elevate themselves and pave the way for others to join in the collective pursuit of justice.

Finally, thank our esteemed readers for investing your time in exploring new perspectives, deepening your understanding of critical topics, or simply supporting this endeavor. Your valuable support helps the authors find a receptive audience and amplifies the message they seek to convey. Together, we contribute to the ongoing narrative of progress, knowledge-sharing, and the relentless pursuit of a fair and just society

Navigating Advocacy and Ethics: Social Justice Educational Leaders' Perspectives

Jill Channing, *East Tennessee State University*
Christopher Benedetti, *Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi*
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Abstract

Equity and inclusion efforts have increased at educational institutions in the United States. However, equity and inclusion leadership has been fraught with political challenges, as well as a lack of resources, clear strategic direction, and campus support and engagement. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study aimed to examine the lived experiences of educators and leaders working for social justice in educational contexts in the United States. The researchers interviewed seven participants, focusing on the research question: How do educational leaders describe the ways they navigate the ethical dimensions of advocacy? The researchers underpinned their analysis using a conceptual framework based on established frameworks for social justice leadership and Critical Race Theory; both emphasize contextual analysis and seek to challenge systemic inequities. The researchers used an inductive and iterative process that produced the following emergent theme: leaders' development of frameworks for advocacy and ethics as they pursue social justice goals. The results suggest specific leadership strategies useful to educational leaders, such as communication, relationship-building, and ethical advocacy for their contexts.

Keywords: social justice leadership, qualitative, multi-institutional, advocacy, Critical Race Theory, inequity, leadership frameworks

Introduction

Over the last 20 years, equity and inclusion efforts have increased at U.S. educational institutions as schools and other organizations continue to grapple with issues of marginalization and inequality (Barnett, 2020; Murphy, 2016). Social justice leadership has been fraught with political challenges: lack of resources, clear strategic direction, and campus support and engagement. Cultural wars have ensued nationally that question even using equity and inclusion terminology. Recent research has highlighted the importance of social justice educational leadership (SJEL) in addressing issues of inequity and marginalization in schools. For example, Lash and Sanchez (2022) emphasized the need for educational leaders to adopt an equity-focused leadership approach that centers on social justice principles. Similarly, Óskarsdóttir et al. (2021) described the role of educational leaders in creating inclusive and equitable learning environments for diverse student populations. These studies underscore the issue of leaders' roles in promoting equity and inclusion in schools and highlight the need for a deeper understanding of how leaders navigate advocacy and ethics in their work.

In this qualitative research study, we sought to explore how educational leaders, identified for their engagement in social justice leadership, described their social justice leadership work. Through interviews with educational leaders, we aimed to gain insights into their perspectives on social justice leadership and their strategies for addressing systemic marginalization in their contexts. This qualitative study was framed by the concept of social justice leadership. More recently, there is a body of work addressing social justice leadership in education (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; DeMatthews et al., 2015; Goldfarb & Grineberg, 2002; Gray & Mendoza-Reis, 2021; Theoharis, 2007; Torrance et al., 2021). Lowery (2022) argued that social justice leadership entails creating a school culture that values diversity and challenges systemic inequalities. Similarly, Rivera-McCutchen (2014) emphasized the role of social justice leadership in fostering equitable access to educational resources and opportunities. These studies highlight the growing recognition of social justice leadership's significance as a conceptual and practical framework for promoting inclusive and equitable educational environments.

Literature Review

Promoting equity and inclusion in education is a complex and challenging task that requires sustained effort and commitment. As Bogotch (2002) noted, there can be no fixed meaning of social justice; thus, there can be no fixed plans for reform. Educational leadership must continually redefine and critique reform efforts within the changing context of their educational landscape and social justice itself. However, the political climate and other internal and external factors can create significant challenges for equity and inclusion leaders and advocates. Moreover, the literature on a myriad of equity and inclusion topics within the field of education has grown over the last two decades, particularly in the U.S. The research has focused on the challenges equity and inclusion advocates and leaders face and on the promotion of social justice and equity, particularly for marginalized students (Aniscow, 2020; Carrington & Andrews, 2022).

Equity and Inclusion Work in Education

Many scholars have described equity and inclusion work's theoretical and practical implications within schools, colleges, and universities. Bell (1992) argued that educational institutions reflect society's values, beliefs, and power structures. Bell noted that educational institutions have historically been exclusionary towards people of color and provided a framework for understanding critical race theory, which explores how racism is systemic in educational institutions. In a study on equity in schools, Rogers (2021) noted that equitable education requires a shift in focus from achievement gaps to systemic oppression and called for educational institutions to engage in anti-oppression work and examine the role of power and privilege in educational settings. Kumashiro (2000) argued that the language of diversity in educational settings often hides issues of power and privilege and that educational institutions should engage in critical pedagogy, which examines how power and privilege operate in educational settings and work toward equity and social justice. Similarly, Theoharis (2007) examined the role of social justice leadership in schools and argued that social justice leaders should address issues of race, class, gender, disability, and sexual orientation in their advocacy, leadership practice, and vision.

In a study on equity and inclusion in higher education, Chun and Evans (2018) examined the role of institutional leadership in promoting equity and inclusion. Chun and Evans noted that institutional leaders should engage in anti-oppression work, develop a strategic plan for equity and inclusion, and foster a culture of inclusion. Kezar and Eckel (2002) argued that such leaders should prioritize diversity and inclusivity while also engaging in critical self-reflection and challenging institutional structures and practices that perpetuate inequity. However, MacDonald (2023) found that reflection alone is insufficient for social justice pursuits. Without critical reflexivity to understand how self-reflection is still socially constructed, leaders can perpetuate symbolic violence and reproduce the disadvantages that they seek to reform.

Social Justice Leadership in Education

Social justice leadership speaks directly to understanding the characteristics and actions of a leader as they pursue social justice goals for their context (DeMatthews et al., 2015). Social justice leadership is defined “as the exercise of altering these [institutional and organizational] arrangements by actively engaging in reclaiming, appropriating, sustaining, and advancing inherent human rights of equity, equality, and fairness in social, economic, educational, and personal dimensions” (Goldfarb & Grineberg, 2002, p. 163). Social justice leadership theory centers equity in terms of deconstructing policies and procedures that create obstacles for student populations being pushed to the margins. While focusing on the ethical, moral, and humanistic values of social justice, leaders must also recognize the impact of culture and history on school systems while pursuing substantive changes (DeMatthews et al., 2015). Theoharis (2007) defined social justice leadership as the leader making “issue(s) of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States central to their advocacy, leadership practice, and vision” (p. 223). This definition centers on “addressing and eliminating marginalization in schools” (p. 239).

The Political Climate's Impact on Equity and Inclusion Work

The political climate can significantly impact the work of equity and inclusion leaders and advocates in education (Hayter & Cahoy, 2018). In recent years, politics and policies have impacted equity and inclusion efforts at educational institutions. The Supreme Court recently ruled that many colleges and universities' affirmative action admissions policies are unconstitutional, and higher education scholars have begun discussing the implications of this decision for many fields such as medicine and other healthcare fields (Aaron et al., 2023). As another example, according to Hess and McAvoy (2015), political pressures and policies have led to the narrowing of the curriculum and a focus on standardized testing, which can be detrimental to equity and inclusion efforts. Political polarization and divisiveness also make it difficult to build consensus around equity and inclusion issues (Hermann, 2023). The recent polarization and politicization of Critical Race Theory have been used to pass educational gag-order legislation in 18 states, banning any discussion of the intentionally broad idea of divisive concepts, further complicating any equity and inclusion effort termed as such (Schwartz, 2023).

Other Factors Impacting Equity and Inclusion Work

In addition to political influences, there are several internal and external pressures and factors that can create challenges for equity and inclusion leaders and advocates. For example, according to Shah et al. (2023), one of the most significant challenges faced by equity and inclusion leaders and advocates is resistance to change. Resistance can come from various sources, including colleagues, parents, and community members. Additionally, Kluch et al. (2022) found that a lack of resources, including funding, time, and staff, can create significant challenges for equity and inclusion efforts in education. These challenges can be particularly acute for under-resourced schools and districts (Adams, 2023; Niño & Perez-Diaz, 2021).

Conceptual Framework

Over the last twenty years, several models and theoretical frameworks for social justice leadership have been proposed. Goldfarb and Grineberg (2002) defined social justice leadership as the exercise of altering institutional and organizational arrangements by actively engaging in reclaiming, appropriating, sustaining, and advancing inherent human rights of equity, equality, and fairness in social, economic, educational, and personal dimensions. In a study on social justice leadership in education, DeMathews and Mawhinney (2014) explored the characteristics and actions of social justice leaders. They contended that social justice leaders should recognize the impact of culture and history on school systems while pursuing substantive changes that address marginalization in schools. Torrance et al. (2021) provided a framework for understanding social justice leadership in schools, noting that social justice leaders should focus on the ethical, moral, and humanistic values of social justice and center equity in terms of deconstructing policies and procedures that create obstacles for student populations being pushed to the margins. Sarid (2021) proposed a multidimensional social justice educational leadership (SJEL) framework with transformative leadership as its basis. Sarid argued that SJEL should exist on a continuum with individual accountability on one end and social equality on the other. Each end of the continuum is necessary for SJEL. The struggle is for leaders to create

a balance between the two. Furman (2012) concluded that many educational leadership preparation programs do not sufficiently address essential capacities for social justice leadership, such as leadership praxis. Furman's proposed framework details social justice leadership capacities and ways educational leadership preparation programs might be designed to facilitate the better development of these capacities. Similarly, Lowery (2019) synthesized existing social justice leadership frameworks to develop a framework for educational leadership preparation programs to foster courage for justice work in educational settings.

Several scholars have discussed ethical frameworks for social justice leadership, which align with our study's findings related to communication, advocacy, and relationship-building. Gray and Mendoza-Reis (2021) and Mendoza-Reis and Flores (2014) introduced a tri-level framework for social justice leadership in schools with multilingual learners. The framework consists of three levels: institutional, pedagogical, and personal. At the institutional level, leaders are encouraged to identify and address structural barriers, advocating for policies that disrupt inequities. The pedagogical level emphasizes administrators' deep understanding of content knowledge relevant to multilingual learners, including culturally sustaining practices, language acquisition theories, and socio-political factors. The personal level focuses on leaders' ideological clarity, prompting them to critically examine their beliefs and challenge societal norms perpetuating inequality. The framework underscores the importance of moral courage, integrity, collaboration, and genuine engagement with parents to foster a nurturing and inclusive learning environment for an increasingly diverse student population. Similarly, Niesche and Keddie (2016) developed an ethical framework of social justice leadership based on Foucault's (2011) and Anderson's (2009) work, emphasizing the concepts of truth-telling, advocacy, and counter-conduct. Niesche and Keddie found that the social justice leaders they interviewed took risks, saw it as their duty to speak the truth, faced criticism for their social justice work, advocated consistently for marginalized groups, and engaged in counter-conduct as a form of resistance to oppressive elements in their contexts.

Critical Race Theory and Social Justice Leadership

Other scholars have explored the intersection of social justice leadership and Critical Race Theory. For example, Khushal (2022), Edirmanasinghe et al. (2022), Khalifa et al. (2016) examined how social justice leaders can use critical approaches such as Critical Race Theory to disrupt dominant narratives and challenge systemic racism in schools. Similarly, Forman et al. (2022) contended that social justice leadership requires a critical consciousness that acknowledges the historical and social contexts of oppression. Critical Race Theory's principles, as developed by Crenshaw et al. (1995) and Delgado and Stefancic (1998), are applicable to this analysis, such as counter-storying telling, social justice and activism, social constructions of race, and intersectionality. Participant's stories provide counter-narratives to dominant discourses about equity and inclusion efforts in schools with a focus not on politics but rather on serving all students effectively. Constructions of the equity and inclusion leader as a person of color are writ large in these narratives, as all the participants are people of color. This also reflects the significant labor imposed upon marginalized populations to effect change for more equitable educational environments. All the participants discuss their work in relation to their

identities as people of color, reflecting the intersections between their work and what they believe to be essential elements of their identities. Intersectionality theory, developed by Crenshaw (2017), highlights how multiple social identities intersect and interact, leading to unique experiences of oppression and privilege. It emphasizes the agency of individuals and communities in recognizing and addressing intersecting systems of power and inequality. The use of Critical Race Theory and social justice leadership theories as a guiding conceptual framework provides this qualitative study with a solid foundation to analyze the data.

Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of educators and leaders working for social justice in educational contexts in the United States. The central research question was the following: How do educational leaders describe the ways they navigate the ethical dimensions of advocacy? In this study, educational leaders' experiences in navigating the ethical dimensions of advocacy are complex and multifaceted, and a qualitative phenomenological approach enables the researchers to capture the depth and intricacy of these experiences. The choice of a qualitative phenomenological approach is vital for this study as it allows researchers to uncover the essence of educational leaders' experiences, explore their interpretations and ethical frameworks, consider contextual factors, and ensure the trustworthiness of the findings. This approach aligns perfectly with the research's aim to provide a deep and meaningful understanding of how educators and leaders work for social justice in educational contexts.

Research Design

Phenomenology lends itself to the study of lived experiences and to discovering the “essence” of these experiences. Phenomenology is a philosophy and methodological approach centered on the perceptions and emotions of participants. The approach focuses, as mentioned, on how participants live experiences and not just their reactions to experiences (Connelly, 2010; Munhall, 2007). Specifically, this study utilized interpretive (hermeneutic) phenomenology, developed by Heidegger (1988). At the core of interpretive phenomenology is the belief that our understanding of the world is shaped by our subjective experiences and interpretations. Heidegger argued that human existence is fundamentally intertwined with the world, and our experiences are not isolated events but are embedded in a broader context. Therefore, to truly grasp the meaning of human existence, one must engage in a process of interpretation and understanding. Interpretive phenomenology emphasizes the importance of context and the hermeneutic circle, which is the idea that we understand individual experiences by considering their relation to the larger whole and vice versa (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015). We recognize that our interpretations are influenced by our preconceptions, biases, and cultural backgrounds. For our study's purposes, interpretive phenomenology is effective because it involves studying individuals' lived experiences and attempting to comprehend the meanings they assign to those experiences. Accordingly, we immersed ourselves in the participants' worlds, seeking to capture the essence of their experiences through in-depth interviews. The goal of interpretive phenomenology, which is what our conclusions suggest, is not to generalize

or establish universal laws but to gain insight into the unique subjective perspectives and meanings constructed by individuals.

Data Collection and Sampling

The data collection methods employed in this qualitative phenomenological study primarily involved in-depth interviews with the participants. Interviews were chosen as the primary data collection method due to their ability to provide rich, in-depth insights into the lived experiences and perceptions of educational leaders working for social justice in educational contexts in the United States. Interviews allow participants to share their narratives, beliefs, and experiences in their own words, enabling researchers to explore the complexity and depth of their experiences.

The choice of interviews as the data collection method was carefully considered for its suitability in capturing the essence of the participants' experiences. Interviews were selected due to their ability to provide a platform for participants to describe their lived experiences, ethical dimensions of advocacy, and perceptions of their roles in supporting marginalized students. Additionally, interpretive phenomenology, the chosen philosophical framework, emphasizes the importance of understanding participants' interpretations and subjective experiences, making interviews a well-aligned data collection method.

The procedures involved in data collection began with participant recruitment, which utilized a combination of searching public directory information available on the Internet and snowball sampling. After obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, interviews were conducted over a two-month period. Each interview session consisted of 13 open-ended questions, designed to elicit participants' narratives and insights related to their work for social justice in educational contexts (e.g., How do you define JEDI in the context of the work you do? How do you and your colleagues effectively navigate JEDI tensions?). Interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy and later transcribed for analysis. During the transcription process, researchers engaged in active listening by repeatedly reviewing recordings to capture nuances and non-verbal cues in participants' responses.

Ethical considerations were of paramount importance throughout the data collection process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they understood the purpose of the study, their rights as participants, and the confidentiality of their responses. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' privacy and confidentiality. Also, measures were put in place to safeguard the data's confidentiality, including secure storage of audio recordings and transcripts with restricted access only to the research team. These ethical safeguards aimed to respect participants' autonomy, protect their identities, and maintain the confidentiality of their responses, ensuring the ethical integrity of the study.

Participants included one self-identifying male and six self-identifying females. Three participants identified as Black, and four identified as Latina. The criteria for inclusion as a participant was an individual who is 18 or older who engages in social justice work in a U.S. educational context. Table 1 provides a summary of the participants' characteristics.

Table 1

Summary of Participant Characteristics

Pseudonym	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Education Sector
Alejandra	Female	Latina	PK-12
Isabella	Female	Latina	PK-12
Janis	Female	Black	Higher education
Maria	Female	Latina	Higher education
Shawna	Female	Latina	PK-12
Victoria	Female	Black	PK-12
William	Male	Black	Higher education

Data Analysis

We used thematic analysis, which is a well-suited approach for uncovering patterns, themes, and meanings within qualitative data. We then engaged in an iterative and inductive analysis process. This involved multiple stages. We began by thoroughly reading and rereading the transcripts to become familiar with the content. Initial codes were generated by identifying meaningful segments of the text that related to the research questions. These codes were often short descriptive labels for segments of data, using ATLAS.ti coding and analysis software. Like Varga and Paulus’s (2014) description:

After several cycles of analysis, we formed tentative interpretations of what the various discursive features were doing, moving back to the data to ground our claims. Finally, we selected representative excerpts from the data to demonstrate our findings through reworking of the analysis (p. 445).

ATLAS.ti allowed us to organize, code, and retrieve data efficiently, enhancing the rigor and efficiency of the analysis process. Codes were then grouped into preliminary themes based on shared meanings and patterns. We continually reviewed and refined these themes. Themes were reviewed, defined, and named to capture the essence of the data. This involved a collaborative process among researchers to ensure clarity and relevance. Utilizing multiple coders, researchers compared codes to ensure inter-coder reliability and consistent codes reflecting emergent themes across transcripts (MacPhail et al., 2016). This inductive and iterative process produced the following emergent theme: social justice leaders’ development of frameworks for ethics and advocacy.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the qualitative research conducted in this study, we employed several strategies. These strategies are commonly used in qualitative research to enhance the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the findings. Credibility refers to the extent to which the findings accurately represent participants' experiences and perspectives (Nassaji, 2020). To establish credibility, we employed member checking, a technique where participants were given the opportunity to review and validate the transcripts and findings. This allowed participants to ensure that their viewpoints were accurately captured and interpreted. Dependability refers to the stability and consistency of the findings over time and across researchers (Nassaji, 2020). We used an iterative process of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Multiple researchers were involved in coding and analyzing the data, and regular meetings were held to discuss emerging themes and resolve any discrepancies. This process helped ensure consistency and reduce the potential for bias in the interpretation of the data. Confirmability refers to the objectivity and neutrality of the findings (Nassaji, 2020). To enhance confirmability, the researchers maintained an audit trail documenting the research process, including decisions made during data collection, analysis, and interpretation. This documentation allowed for transparency and helped establish the researchers' accountability. Transferability refers to the extent to which the findings can be applicable or transferable to other contexts or settings (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). To enhance transferability, we provided rich descriptions of the research context, participants, and the data collection process. We also included direct quotes from participants to support the interpretation of the findings. These details allow readers to assess the relevance of the findings to their own contexts.

Critical Reflection and Reflexivity

We actively engaged in critical reflection and reflexivity throughout the research process. Critical reflection involves examining one's assumptions, biases, and preconceptions that may influence the research process and findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Reflexivity, on the other hand, involves acknowledging the researcher's positionality and how their identities, experiences, and social locations may shape their perspectives and interactions with participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Given the diverse backgrounds of the researchers, including our ethnicities and genders, critical reflection and reflexivity were particularly important in this study. We continuously reflected on our own perspectives, assumptions, and potential biases related to equity and inclusion issues in educational contexts. We acknowledged the influence of our identities on the research process and made efforts to minimize any potential biases. However, we recognize our identities and experiences inevitably influence our interpretations and research processes. Therefore, we recognize the need to identify our own diverse identities, including Black, Latino, and White ethnicities, and multiple gender identities. Also, as educators and leaders, we consider ourselves part of the population that we are studying, giving us "insider" status. However, we acknowledge that we have blind spots; therefore, we engage in reflective

practices to gain insights, develop new knowledge, and reflect on processes and our own thoughts.

We maintained reflexive journals, where we recorded their thoughts, reflections, and emotions related to the research process. These journals served as a means for self-reflection and allowed us to be aware of our positionality and its potential impact on data collection, analysis, and interpretation. By engaging in critical reflection and reflexivity, we aimed to enhance the transparency and trustworthiness of the study. We were able to critically examine our own perspectives, challenge assumptions, and acknowledge the potential limitations and implications of their identities in the research process. This approach helped ensure a more nuanced understanding of the participants' experiences and perspectives.

Results

This qualitative research study explored leaders' and educators' advocacy and ethics in promoting equity and inclusion initiatives in educational contexts. The study revealed that the participants recognized the moral and ethical obligations that they have as leaders to speak up and advocate for marginalized students, even when doing so may have personal and professional consequences. The participants emphasized the importance of having an ethical framework for advocacy and creating collaborative environments that support faculty, staff, and students' psychological well-being. The participants engaged in participatory and transformational leadership and building relationships and trust to facilitate difficult conversations and to promote equity, equality, and fairness. This research study's findings highlight the vital role that leaders play in creating positive and empowering learning environments that support all students' success, especially those who have been historically marginalized and underrepresented.

Leaders' Frameworks for Advocacy and Ethics

Participants described the development of ethical frameworks for advocacy based on communication and critical reflection, although not all participants identified with the activist role or label.

Advocating and Communicating

Victoria mentioned, "We have a moral obligation as an individual to do what's right, and there's a quote, 'to speak your truth, even if your voice trembles.'" She saw moral and ethical imperatives in her role as a leader to speak up even when it was challenging or when speaking up may have personal and professional consequences. Victoria described her role as "an advocate for our students, our most marginalized students, students who are often overlooked." She identified examples where she advocated for students such as discriminatory dress code and hair policies. She said that when barriers are put in place or marginalized students are placed at a disadvantage, "then we must speak up and say, 'it's not okay.'"

Janis also saw the need “bold leadership.” She discussed advice that she had heard from a DEI expert who stated:

I didn't know how I felt about his statement when he made this comment, he says, ‘Do the work. Call it something else. So, if ‘equity’ is a word that's distracting you from doing the work, do the work and call it something else.

Due to the political environment where she works, Janis focuses on doing equity work, rather than contesting discourses, and disarming others through diplomatic and caring communication.

William did not see himself as an activist but made connections between his work and an ethical framework focused on the advancement of equity and inclusion in his context. “The way that I've viewed the work, I feel like it has to be done with open hands and not a closed fist. And sometimes it's hard to not have a closed fist. But I don't.” He used his communication style to disarm people “to have the hard conversations and to really get at gender equity or gender equity issues or racial equity issues across the campus because people have got to be able to receive what you are saying.” William's approach involves using open communication about gender and racial equity issues. By avoiding an aggressive or confrontational approach, William believes that he can create a more receptive environment to tackle complex social issues.

William also discussed when a more direct and passionate approach is necessary. He narrated his story of the summer of 2020, the impact of George Floyd's murder, and the subsequent social and political unrest.

The statements that I made in the summer of 2020 ... were eye-opening for the [President's] Cabinet. I think some of that ... is also about being bold enough to make statements. ... Nobody was thoughtful enough to reach out from the Cabinet. That's the president and provost. ‘None of you said anything to me; you didn't ask anything.’ So, I think, from time to time, it's important to be very direct and poignant. But also understand that can't happen often because if it happens too often, the invisible barriers come up, and people don't listen and close off. But that ‘feeling statement’ sometimes is important.

William's colleagues, serving on the President's Cabinet, did not reach out or provide support to him or other people of color on campus during the aftermath of George Floyd's murder. He discussed the importance of sharing the impact these murders had on him specifically as a black man. These “feeling statements,” which he said should be rare to be impactful, are important because they underscore the need for both understanding and action on the parts of those in positions of power and privilege.

William organized a listening session among Black male students and the university's president. As a male of African descent, William understood the importance of being heard and seen. He

recognized that many Black students, particularly male students, often face systemic barriers that make it difficult for them to succeed in higher education.

So, I think that was one of the biggest efforts that was made was that we were able to coordinate with the group of students, many of them were student leaders of color, a listening session with the president. And for many of them have never had a

conversation with the president before, so that was very important thing. Being a male of African descent and listening to colleagues and listening to the banter around the country, many of us just wanted to be heard and we wanted to be seen.

By organizing this listening session, William helped create a space where these students could express their concerns and share their experiences with the university's leadership. William emphasized the need for recognizing of injustices and their effects on Black men in the United States.

Student Success, Institutional Culture, and Faculty Impact

Maria discussed her role in academia as a professor and her ethical obligation to teach educational leadership students to create equitable and supportive learning environments at the schools where they work.

I ended up ... in an ed leadership department and then facing a bunch of students, mostly white male students, where I'm like, oh my gosh, I better do a good job because I don't want you to go out there and mess with these children. Right? Like, I don't trust you. ... I'll be like, 'Listen, cuz I'm thinking about the people, like my people [participant emphasized], and thinking about the families I work with, the communities I come from. And so that, that pushed me to then really think about how do I use my influence, my leadership to, as an educator in those classes so that my students do not go and perpetuate these forms of oppression?

Maria is motivated by her personal background and experiences working with families and communities that she wants to help support and protect from harmful practices. Maria expressed a commitment to using her influence and leadership to make a positive impact on her students' future work with diverse students and communities.

Janis discussed her efforts and the relationship between student outcomes and equity work. She highlighted the importance of students succeeding in classes taught by culturally competent and equity-minded professors and instructors. According to Janis, supporting faculty and staff is crucial, emphasizing the need for them to feel valued and equipped in their roles. She stressed that equity work involves engaging “the campus community” and ensuring that “faculty and staff [feel] like they have what they need [and feel] valued in their roles and positions to come to work, being engaged in that psychological connection.” Janis directly

linked the creation of an inclusive environment for all campus constituencies to the promotion of a space where marginalized and underrepresented students can thrive.

Alejandra's leadership approach centered on addressing inequities and leveraging students' strengths, rather than fixating on their shortcomings. In her words, "Really making it about the impact that we're having on students, not about personal philosophical differences, but what impact are we having on kids? What impact do we want to have on kids?" Alejandra highlighted the importance of confronting uncomfortable conversations, particularly around the use of deficit language when discussing students. By doing so, she aims to bring awareness to how language and beliefs can contribute to educational inequities. She explained, "I've been able to address some of the inequalities, but also engaging in sometimes those uncomfortable conversations about how we're using deficit language when addressing kids, when we're discussing about how kids can or cannot do things."

Furthermore, Alejandra critiqued the prevailing testing culture, emphasizing that it tends to assess narrow skills like memorization and basic academic tasks. She stated, "What we're testing right now is their ability to memorize content or to be able to write, or to be able to read, which is very important. But if we're only focusing on that, we're not really looking at the bigger picture. We're not really giving the student an opportunity to show their true potential."

Alejandra's leadership aligns with current research advocating for a strengths-based approach in education. This approach, as supported by Adiredja (2019) and Pulcini (2022), emphasizes building on students' strengths rather than dwelling on their weaknesses. By adopting this perspective, educators can cultivate a positive and empowering learning environment that supports all students, regardless of their backgrounds or experiences.

The Ethics of Critical Reflection

It was also a clear imperative that the participants understood that they were a part of the work to be done as well, and reflection was a critical part of their ethical frameworks. They consistently referred to understanding their own biases and in the case of higher education faculty, helping their students and future leaders to engage in reflective work as well. For example, Maria shared:

There are times I am going to create intentional spaces for me to reflect on work we've done in areas that I want to improve on. ... And we need that pause and a reflective moment, which I teach my students to do as administrators.

Maria acknowledged that reflection and intentional spaces were necessary for personal growth and development. As an educator, she teaches her students to do the same and recognizes the value of creating intentional spaces to reflect on their work and take action to effect positive and just changes in educational systems.

Similarly, Isabella reported that critical reflection and mentoring have taught her about discerning when it is appropriate and worthwhile to engage in action to effect change.

Those are things that ... I've done and continue doing, addressing this mountain, systems of oppression. And sometimes I think ... you have to know when to engage and when not to engage. You have to understand the community itself, the school you're working with, and the district you're working with, children too, to ensure that you're moving the right way.

Through her process of critical reflection, Isabella was able to thoughtfully consider her unique context and the needs of the students, community, and individuals with whom she collaborates, and she uses this information to discern when to take action to address oppressive forces.

Shawna underscored the significance of incorporating critical reflection as an ethical and pedagogical tool within social justice leadership.

I'm going to go back to reflection we do we do a reflective practice, not just with staff, but we also do it with students, where students are having to forecast or what would you do different or how would you if you could do it all over, what would you do? So, I incorporate a lot of those kinds of practices so that students... own their accomplishments and to really reflect on the change [that] you can make.

Shawna advocated for a robust culture of critical reflection in social justice leadership that goes beyond a mere routine. It is positioned as an ethical practice, a teaching tool, and a means for individuals, both staff and students, to take ownership of their accomplishments and contribute to positive change.

Trust and Relationships

Trust is a fundamental component for school effectiveness and an integral element of positive school leadership and advocacy (Seashore et al., 2010). Participants spoke of the value of establishing trust as a district leader in Latinx and Black communities. Alejandra pointed out: "Collaboration is important. But before you are able to collaborate, you have to be able to build rapport. And in order to build rapport, people have to trust you. People have to trust each other." Likewise, when describing her strategies for effecting change and collaborating with others, Maria reported:

I've built that relationship with them to create a space where I can support them. ... So, I feel like a lot of that really intentional setting of space, and trust is super important to then engage in the work together.

Maria emphasized the intentional efforts she made to build trust with others to create a conducive space for support and engagement in their work. This aligns with the understanding that trust is not automatically granted but is nurtured through consistent actions and behaviors. By intentionally setting a space that promotes trust, leaders can create an atmosphere where individuals feel respected, valued, and supported.

Trust forms the foundation for building relationships, fostering collaboration, and creating a supportive environment for achieving educational goals. The statements from the participants in the study highlight the crucial role of trust in their leadership practices within Latinx and Black communities. Establishing trust is seen as a prerequisite for collaboration and rapport-building, as Alejandra noted. Before individuals can effectively work together towards common goals, they must feel comfortable and have confidence in one another. Trust acts as a facilitator, enabling open communication, shared decision-making, and a sense of psychological safety within the school community. Communities that have historically been marginalized or oppressed may have experienced mistrust due to systemic inequities. Building trust requires acknowledging and addressing these historical and structural factors, as well as demonstrating authenticity, empathy, and cultural responsiveness.

Discussion

This study reveals the ways equity and inclusion leaders used communication strategies to engage in social justice leadership and navigate “culture wars” and politics. Our findings highlight the importance of community- and relationship-building, effective communication, and personal examination in social justice leadership. Like the leaders in Niesche and Keddie (2016)’s study, our participants emphasized the need for advocacy that centers on student success, particularly for marginalized and underrepresented student populations. Their communication strategies focus on building relationships and community to create collaborative environments that are more conducive to all students’ learning and all employees’ productivity and engagement. Participants used communication strategies to advocate for marginalized and minoritized groups, viewing this as an ethical imperative for them as leaders even when this may come at personal costs for them. This study addresses a gap in the literature about the enacting of social justice leadership in educational contexts. Specifically, participants recognized and identified challenges that they faced but saw ways to address these through understanding and communicating well within their contexts, speaking up when policies are harmful to marginalized students, and developing and enacting ethical and moral frameworks for working with campus communities based on social justice principles.

Another unique finding is the emphasis on building an ethical framework for advocacy and the importance of personal examination to ensure that leaders are engaging in their work responsibly and with community in mind. Niesche and Keddie (2016) found that the educational leaders in their study “constitute themselves as ethical subjects and how they are also constituted by certain discourses as ethical subjects as they work towards goals of social justice in their schools” (p. 6). Likewise, our participants linked their identities as people of color with their ethical frameworks for student success, as they worked for all students to have opportunities and excellent educational experiences. This “moral frame of reference” drove the trajectory of these participants’ work (Normore & Brooks, 2014, p. 29). Their ethical discourses related to advocacy and responsibility for communities and children of color and their success and progress. When enacting their ethical frameworks for advocacy, they used reflection and communication strategies as tools. Participants frequently discussed reflecting on their practices and adjusting as their contexts required, engaging in what Freire (2018) described as

praxis, reflecting on the realities of their environment, and then taking action to change and improve conditions for underserved and minoritized populations, as critical reflection is necessary but not sufficient.

Scholars such as Darling-Hammond (2017) and Ladson-Billings (2014; 1995) have argued that effective social justice leaders promote equitable practices, challenge systemic inequalities, and cultivate a sense of agency and critical consciousness among students. This aligns with the participants' ideas that focus on critical reflection aims to empower students to recognize their capacity to effect change. However, centering the work on themselves and not solely on others meant that personal examination helped them to ensure the work is being done ethically, responsibly, and with the community and students in mind.

The field of ethnic studies might be helpful to social justice leadership in education, as these participants specifically discussed the ways that their identities as people of color intersected with their social justice in education work. Specifically, leaders' understanding of both "ethnic identity" and "ethnic consciousness" intersected with their leadership and ethical frameworks for advocacy. The Latinx leaders interviewed for this study, for example, understood both their Latinx identity as well as consciousness in their responses. They spoke of their responsibility to advocate for the Latino students in their schools. Likewise, the Black leaders interviewed recognized the ways their identities intersected with their work and the ethical imperative to serve underrepresented and minoritized populations.

Current literature on social justice in education supports our participants' goals and strategies. Goldfarb and Grinberg (2002) contended that "authentic participation" and community engagement are essential to social justice leadership (p. 167), and Hafner (2010) contended that leadership preparation programs should teach students to collect diverse forms of data and to conduct audits to ensure "equitable access and outcomes" and to develop strategic plans for change (p. 211). Further, Jean-Marie et al. (2009) argued that leadership preparation programs "should promote opportunities for critical reflection, leadership praxis, critical discourse, and develop critical pedagogy related to issues of ethics, inclusion, democratic schooling, and social justice" (p. 20). Scholars such as Gay (2018) and Grant and Sleeter (2012) have emphasized the importance of creating culturally responsive classrooms that validate students' identities, experiences, and cultural backgrounds. By doing so, educators can foster a sense of belonging and agency, which are essential components of social justice leadership. Additionally, the concept of agency aligns with the work of scholars like Darling-Hammond (2017), Ladson-Billings (2014; 1995), and Nieto (2017), who argue for empowering students to recognize their own potential and the impact of their decisions. By instilling a sense of agency in students and the belief that their choices have significance, educators can motivate them to become active agents of change and to become successful learners.

Limitations and Delimitations

This study's participants all worked and resided in the United States. Their contexts are diverse. However, their experiences may not be generalizable to populations everywhere. We have provided rich descriptions and detailed quotations to ensure that readers can determine

applicable insights for their own contexts. All participants were people of color, and there was only one male-identifying participant. Further qualitative studies may seek more diverse samples to learn more about the ways identities intersect with justice work in educational contexts.

Conclusions and Implications

The study aimed to explore the experiences of education leaders and educators engaged in equity and inclusion work, specifically how they engage in social justice leadership. The conceptual framework was based on social justice leadership principles and Critical Race Theory, as defined in the previous literature and which are focused on creating policies that advance human rights of equity, equality, and fairness in social, economic, educational, legal, and personal dimensions. The study utilized a qualitative methodology, where seven participants were interviewed, and a central theme was derived from the transcripts. The emergent theme was educational leaders' development of frameworks for social justice advocacy and ethics. The findings highlighted the importance of developing ethical frameworks for advocacy, community- and relationship-building, and a culture of belongingness for marginalized populations. It was also important for the leaders to understand their own biases and engage in reflective work. Participants' work focused on helping campuses and students be more successful, with the goal of reducing the achievement gap between marginalized and white students.

While there is a growing body of work on social justice leadership in education, there is a need for more qualitative research on the experiences of leaders, teachers, and students engaged in equity and inclusion work. There is also a need to explore quantitatively the impact of social justice leadership on student outcomes and the achievement gap. Additionally, there is a need to include the perspectives of leaders of color (LOC). A recent Wallace Foundation report concluded that LOC are particularly important in schools with marginalized students (Grissom et al., 2021).

The study has several implications for policy and practice. Specifically, educators' and leaders' work entails consistent reflection and mindful actions to ensure that equity and inclusion work is done ethically, responsibly, and with the community in mind. Leaders can integrate social justice principles into policy and practice at the institutional level by ensuring that students are treated fairly in discipline and academic policies and that educators are equipped with the appropriate resources and professional development to support all students' successful learning. The emphasis on ethical advocacy for marginalized student populations can inform leadership development programs and guide leaders in their daily work. For example, educational leadership educators can focus on communication, reflection, and community- and trust-building skills in training future educational leaders. Leaders and educators also must work to understand their own biases and engage in reflective work. These understandings support the development of advocacy-focused leadership, which means doing social justice work with a critical lens and not perpetuating biases.

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MENTOR REFLECTION

Navigating Advocacy and Ethics: Social Justice Educational Leaders' Perspectives

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I have been fortunate to mentor new educators throughout my career and take great joy in helping others develop the knowledge and skills they seek. However, we might forget that those with experience can also benefit from mentoring, even if they are not the typical target. Mentoring the experienced can be more nuanced and imperceptible but no less valuable. This essay seeks to provide a reflective narrative of my experience serving as a mentor as part of the ICPEL/JEDI Social Justice Scholars Special Issue project.

Mentoring Agreements

Mentoring agreements are generally effective tools to maintain accountability throughout the mentoring process. Agreements can define products and establish timelines to promote completion. This guard railing encourages a successful mentoring process, though experienced mentees may not need the same guardrails as less experienced mentees. In some cases, a formal agreement may not be required, given the level of comfort and competence already possessed by the mentee.

In my initial communication with my mentee, it was evident that a formal, written mentoring agreement wasn't needed. My mentee clearly understood the project. Instead, an informal, less structured agreement emerged through our email exchanges, allowing the mentees to define what they needed from me: timely feedback to support publication. Guardrails were unnecessary because my mentee had already prepared for and organized the work. Instead of leading the process, the mentoring agreement placed me in a supporting role so as not to slow or confuse the mentee and their work.

Relationships

Mentoring the experienced can be more fluid and productive when a relationship is in place before the mentoring. Existing relationships can reduce reluctance or discomfort, as the mentor would be familiar with the mentee's knowledge before beginning the work. This prior knowledge allows the mentor to work from the current state, building knowledge and skills from what is already known and tailoring the mentoring experience.

I was fortunate to have a previous working relationship with my mentee, so I was already aware of their expertise related to this project. My mentee had an ongoing manuscript in mind for this project, which was shared with me at the onset. We scheduled a meeting via Zoom to discuss the manuscript and project, and it was evident that the mentee did not require my content expertise. Instead, I offered my editorial support to ensure the manuscript was ready for

publication. In deferring content expertise to my mentee, I would disarm any underlying concerns of my interest in assuming control, freeing up our relationship to collaborate.

Progress Tracking

Working with experienced mentees provides the mentor with flexibility using check-in points and due dates, as the mentee likely already understands workflows and general expectations. Asking the mentee about their preferred workflow empowers them by showing the process is in their control rather than the mentor's. Even with this empowerment, mentors must still monitor progress to ensure that the work remains on track toward completion. With experienced mentees, transparent and regular communication ensures this progress.

My mentee and I did not set specific check-in points, as I was committed to providing the agreed-upon feedback promptly. We were both aware of the project's final due date, so I was not overly concerned about setting additional, periodic due dates. To promote regular communication, I sent emails to check on the progress of the following manuscript draft if communication had become sparse. I also emailed if my feedback was unexpectedly delayed so my mentee could continue working.

Conclusion

Mentoring works best as an individualized experience. To be effective, mentors must be adept at recognizing the individual needs of their mentees and adjust plans accordingly. Arguably, this is one of the more challenging facets of mentoring, as every mentee will need something different. However, this begs the question of efficiency: How can mentors maximize their impact when facing time constraints? An established mentoring structure could aid efficiency, especially with onboarding training, to orient the mentor and mentee before the work begins. Any structure developed would need room for adaptation to the mentee's needs, as my experienced mentee may have been better prepared than others and would not have benefited from unnecessary guardrails.

Some mentors may feel they cannot contribute much to the experienced mentee, especially when the mentee already has the requisite clarity, direction, and expertise. For those coordinating mentoring programs, it is essential to assure mentors that their support of mentees could be wide-ranging. Sometimes, an experienced mentee only needs a sounding board, which is as valuable as providing direct, formative feedback to less-experienced mentees. Mentors should be empowered to do what is best for the mentee, even if the workload may feel less than previous mentoring experiences.

As mentors, our primary goal should be to help our mentees be better (in whatever way that would be defined) today than they were yesterday. I was comfortable with my mentee's control of the project and was proud of their commitment to finish, which only required my reviewer's eyes and encouraging, timely emails. I appreciate the experience and thank my mentee for entrusting me to support their work

“You Need People Who Support You”: Counterspaces for Women of Color Community College Faculty

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Abstract

Research demonstrates that Women of Color faculty experience multiple systems of oppression in the academy. However, much of the literature surrounding the topic of Women of Color faculty is situated within university environments. A paucity of research sheds light on the experiences of Women of Color faculty within the community college setting. In this investigation, I explored how Women of Color community college faculty members found and engaged in counterspaces to help them navigate academia. This research study illuminates the testimonios of 10 Women of Color community college faculty across the United States. The findings of this study offer implications for researchers and community college administrators to carefully consider the experiences of Women of Color faculty within these institutional types.

Keywords: community colleges, faculty, Women of color, counterspaces

Introduction

Within the United States, approximately 1,044 community colleges enroll over 11 million students (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2021). These educational institutions are well known to serve large populations of Students of Color, low-income students, and first-generation college students (Ma & Baum, 2016; Malcom-Piqueux, 2018). Unfortunately, community college faculty do not reflect the populations of students they serve. For example, community colleges employ White faculty at disproportionately high rates (Finklestein et al., 2016). Approximately 75% of community college instructional faculty are White, 7% are Black or African American, 6% are Latinx, 4% are Asian, and less than one percent are American Indian or Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian, and Multiracial (AACC, 2016). Given the small proportion of Faculty of Color at community colleges, research on community colleges should center their experiences.

Extant literature examining faculty member experiences demonstrates that faculty members with marginalized identities experience discrimination within a four-year institutional context (Arnold et al., 2016; Dade et al., 2015; Terosky et al., 2014). For example, women faculty members are more likely to be assigned to more service-related roles and assignments within their department or college (Terosky et al., 2014). Additionally, Faculty of Color members are exposed to chilly racial climates and may be encouraged to join diversity and inclusion committees, types of service that are not as highly valued as research and teaching concerning the tenure track process (Arnold et al., 2016; Dade et al., 2015). Women of Color faculty members experience *both* gendered and racialized systems of oppression simultaneously. Research indicates that Women of Color faculty members face an exacerbation of challenges within the workplace such as a lack of mentorship, inequitable salaries, biased promotion to tenure, poor course evaluations, and student contestations in the classroom environment (Dade et al., 2015; Ortega-Liston & Rodriguez Soto, 2014).

The current published scholarship on Women of Color faculty members centers the experiences of Women of Color tenure-track faculty members within four-year institutions. There is a gap in the literature that seeks to understand the explicit experiences of Women of Color community college faculty members. The community college is a system of higher education that is typically not given as much attention when compared to highly selective research institutions. In addition, Twombly and Townsend (2008) found that faculty members at four-year institutions hold a general sense of arrogance and elite status over faculty at community colleges, thus, reflecting the exclusivity that exists within the field of higher education. Therefore, the experiences of Women of Color faculty members at a four-year institution cannot translate to a community college environment because of the elitism that community colleges experience (Doran & Lucht, 2021; Twombly & Townsend, 2008). Because community colleges serve such diverse groups of students, the field of higher education must explore the experiences of community college Faculty of Color. Understanding the experiences of community college Faculty of Color, and Women of Color specifically, can help academia engage in broader conversations related to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Purpose

This paper is part of a larger dissertation project that explored the intersectional experiences of Women of Color community college faculty. This study focused on how Women of Color community college faculty found and engaged in counterspaces to help them navigate academia. The research question that centered this study was: How do Women of Color community college faculty members locate or cultivate counterspaces within and outside of the academy?

Literature Review

To situate the current study, this literature review is organized into two sections. The first section offers an overview of scholarship that centers Women of Color faculty experiences. The second section explores what is known about Women of Color community college faculty.

Women of Color Faculty Experiences within University Environments

Scholarship demonstrates that women faculty experience patriarchal challenges as they are socialized into the academy. For example, women on the promotion and tenure track are more likely to be confused with the clarity of their roles and overutilized for service demands (Kelly & McCann, 2014). Additionally, women faculty are historically undervalued and unrecognized and are more often assigned to functions deemed to be more domestic within academia, such as service-related or administrative tasks that are not as valued as research and teaching in relation to the tenure and promotion process (Terosky et al., 2014). Women are also known to receive less access and lower quality mentoring within their departments and institutions, making them feel excluded within academic environments that are traditionally known as patriarchal approaches to leadership and evaluation (Terosky et al., 2014).

Considering intersectionality within the academy, Women of Color faculty members simultaneously experience multiple systems of oppression. For example, Women of Color faculty may experience a lack of mentorship, inequitable salaries, and disparate promotion to tenure because of their minoritized identities as Women of Color (Dade et al., 2015; Ortega-Liston & Rodriguez Soto, 2014). Scholarship illustrates several broad themes relating to the experiences of Women of Color faculty that include: a lack of representation, high service-related expectations, and being challenged or questioned by colleagues and students. Women of Color who obtain a faculty position within colleges and universities experience multiple marginality and additional pressure to perform when being the first or the only one in a department, school, and institution (Turner, 2002; Turner et al., 2008). Relatedly, the lack of racial and gendered representation on college campuses adds additional labor Women of Color put forth to engage in a multitude of diversity committees and support marginalized students on campus. Higher education leaders are eager to boast about the diversity on their campuses (Gonzales et al., 2013). However, college and university administrators tokenize the Women of Color faculty to exploit their existence within the organization for its benefit. This results in extraordinary requests for service and the conceptualization that they can and should represent their entire race or ethnicity (Gonzales et al., 2013; Turner, 2002). Engaging in

service-related activities may also hinder Women of Color faculty and their promotion and tenure process because institutions undervalue service in relation to institutional advancement (Domingo et al., 2020; Murakami & Núñez, 2014; Ortega-Liston & Rodriguez Soto, 2014). The inequities Women of Color faculty members experience may even result in stress related to discrimination, in turn, impacting their research productivity or forcing them to choose to leave the academy entirely (Dade et al., 2015; Eagan & Garvey, 2015).

Women of Color Faculty Experiences within Community College Environments

There is a paucity of research on the experiences of Women of Color faculty within the community college sector compared to Women of Color faculty within four-year institutions. Research demonstrates that community colleges are more likely to hire faculty who are women or People of Color when compared to four-year institutions (Gahn & Twombly, 2001). However, Opps and Poplin Gosetti (2002) found that the proportion of full-time women faculty increased within the community college over time, yet it was not uniform across racial and ethnic groups. White women faculty experienced the largest increase in proportional representation, followed by little to no increases for Black, Latinx, Asian American, and American Indian women faculty (Opps & Poplin Gosetti, 2002). HaMai (2014) explored the experiences of Women of Color community college faculty in Southern California and found that they experienced chilly climates and cultures due to multiple forms of marginalization. Though these Women of Color faculty experienced hostile environments, HaMai (2014) found that they were “overwhelmingly satisfied in their faculty work. Their commitment to serving underrepresented students and sense of responsibility to the community at large mediated the chilliness” (p. 2). Because Women of Color faculty are a minority within the community college system, scholars must contribute to this area of scholarship to further understand and explore their experiences within this institutional type across varying regions of the United States.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework that informed this study is counterspaces. Hostile campus racial climates have been demonstrated to negatively influence People of Color psychologically, socially, and academically (Solórzano et al., 2000). In response to hostile campus racial climates, Solórzano et al. (2000) coined the term counterspaces as they found them to be a positive environment for Students of Color. Counterspaces are locations or groups in which People of Color can challenge deficit perspectives and create positive relationships with one another (Solórzano et al., 2000). Counterspaces can also be defined as spaces that “build a sense of community” (Yosso & López, 2010, p. 84).

Case and Hunter (2012) proposed counterspaces as a conceptual framework to analyze how counterspaces “challenge deficit-oriented societal narratives concerning marginalized individuals’ identities” (p. 257). Through this conceptual framework, Case and Hunter (2012) suggested that challenging deficit-oriented societal narratives occur through three processes: narrative identity work, acts of resistance, and direct relational transactions. Narrative identity work refers to the process in which marginalized individuals give meaning to themselves and others through narratives, thus, contesting societal representations and bringing healing and

restoration to their lives (Case & Hunter, 2012). Additionally, Case and Hunter (2012) argue that counterspaces serve as sites that can provide opportunities for individuals to engage in self-enhancing behaviors like offering social critique or engaging in acts of resistance. Lastly, direct relational transactions refer to processes with direct and routine transactions between members of a counterspace such as engaging in communication and offering social support in response to systems of oppression (Case & Hunter, 2012). Members of a counterspace offer empathy, social support, and community amongst each other, reducing feelings of isolation and exclusion.

Methods

Testimonios are personal narratives that emerged within Latin American liberation movements as a method to create knowledge and politicized understandings of identity and community (Delgado Bernal et al., 2016; Latina Feminist Group, 2001). One form of employing testimonios as a methodological approach includes participants, or testimonialistas, and an interlocutor, who acts as an ally and learns from the stories and narratives of testimonialistas (Delgado Bernal et al., 2016). Through this approach, the testimonialista is recognized as the expert of knowledge related to their community's experiences, thus, challenging the traditional academic notions of researchers as the sole producers of knowledge (Delgado Bernal, 2009). I utilized testimonios as the methodological approach for this study to shed light on inequities and systems of oppression related to Women of Color community college faculty and offer recommendations for transformation and liberation.

Researcher Positionality: Assemblage of Locations

Because every individual has unique experiences and journeys, researchers must self-reflect on their social locations, histories, and trajectories that shape what they know and how they know (Patel, 2016). In this section, I adopt Patel's (2016) assemblage of locations to explore my own set of personal and professional coordinates to provide

both you and the reader an idea of whose eyes you might catch a look through now and then, and also to manifest a stance of all knowledge, and therefore research, as ontological and situated as coming from somewhere(s) and someone(s). (p. 5)

I identify as a bisexual Woman of Color, specifically Mexipina (Mexican and Filipina), who is a second-year tenure-track faculty member learning how to navigate academia. Previously, I worked at a few California Community Colleges supporting current or former foster youth and first-year community college students. In addition, I aspired to become a community college counseling faculty member before pursuing a doctoral degree. My personal and professional experiences have informed the way I engaged in this study and with testimonialistas who shared their testimonios with me. These experiences influenced how I critically thought about the ways systems of oppression manifest within community college environments and how Women of Color community college faculty engaged in counterspaces.

Data Collection and Analysis

I borrowed from Pérez Huber's (2009) three-phase process with testimonios to guide me through the data collection and analysis process. The three-phase process includes preliminary, collaborative, and final data analysis stages in which data collection and analysis happen simultaneously. According to Pérez Huber (2009), preliminary data collection and analysis must occur first. Therefore, the first part of data collection for this study was recruiting participants to engage in a one-on-one interview using a semi-structured interview protocol. To select testimonialistas for this study, I used purposeful sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Purposeful sampling is a technique "to intentionally sample a group of people that can best inform the researcher about the research problem under examination" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 149). I then interviewed 10 testimonialistas during this part of the data collection. Each interview was conducted virtually through Zoom. The length of interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 66 minutes. The interview centered on building rapport with the testimonialistas and exploring their deeper intersectional experiences as a Woman of Color community college faculty member.

After interviews were completed with each testimonialista, I asked them to send a one to two-page reflection. This reflection was to include their experiences sharing their narratives with me. They were also asked to share additional information about their experiences that they did not yet share or wanted to expand on. I received written reflections from 8 of the 10 testimonialistas who were interviewed. Once I received the reflections, I delved into the data to begin the preliminary data analysis process (Pérez Huber, 2009). Through this process, I identified thematic categories using an online qualitative software, Dedoose. I then utilized these categories to develop an interview protocol to be used in the second stage, the focus group.

Next, I invited testimonialistas to participate in a focus group and engage in the collaborative data analysis phase (Pérez Huber, 2009). Of the 8 women who submitted a written reflection, 6 women participated in a focus group. Due to varied schedules, I conducted two focus groups, rather than one, with three women in each setting using a semi-structured interview protocol. Focus group interviews were conducted virtually through Zoom. The first focus group interview lasted 54 minutes, and the second lasted 66 minutes. Within the focus group, I offered an approach for establishing trustworthiness through member-checking the themes I identified from the preliminary analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). During this time, women had the opportunity to let me know whether the initial themes related or differed from their experiences. In addition, the focus group allowed me and the testimonialistas to build community with one another. Testimonialistas received a \$20 gift card incentive for participating in the study following the focus group.

Lastly, I transitioned into the final data analysis phase, "combining the findings of the preliminary and collaborative phases to engage a knowledge production process that incorporated participants into the analytic process" (Pérez Huber, 2009, p. 648). The one-on-one interviews, written reflection, and focus group dialogue are the three qualitative sources of

data that were used for my dissertation study. Like Pérez Huber (2009), I classified analytic codes to draw connections to the theoretical framework and make sense of testimonialista experiences. Through the final data analysis, I identified themes that I present below.

Findings

Co-creating or engaging in counterspaces proved to be powerful for Women of Color community college faculty members. Women of Color faculty engaged in counterspaces within and outside of their campus environments that braided the three domains of counterspaces (narrative identity work, acts of resistance, and direct relational transactions) together (Case & Hunter, 2012). Overall, counterspaces acted as a form of protection or shield to ease and minimize the oppressive experiences of testimonialistas.

Contesting Societal (Mis)Representations and Constructing Identity

Testimonialistas spoke to the ways in which they gave meaning to themselves and others despite societal (mis)representations. To go into detail, Belen, a Mexican woman and tenured Counseling faculty, spoke about how imperative it was to be in a counterspace with another Woman of Color faculty member as she transitioned into the community college environment. Within her new role coordinating a special program, she was assigned to work closely with this faculty member to support students within that program. She said,

My work partner was instrumental in the community that I have because she was at this college for three or four years [when I started]. She helped guide me through a lot of things. I love her because we're a good balance. My work partner is my counterspace on so many levels. She's my safe space where I can truly feel like I can be myself with her and she's helped me grow in different ways. We're very different, but we're so similar too, which is beautiful. I can rely on her at any time and she's always checking in. I'm checking in on her, too. That has helped me a lot. It's always quality over quantity. Be mindful of who you surround yourself with because that says a lot about you but also challenges you. Choose people that challenge you in a really healthy way and help you grow because it's important.

When Belen started her career at this college, she found community with her work partner who had extensive knowledge of the college. The support she received from her helped her transition into a new work environment and become confident in her professional abilities. Unfortunately, when building community and a counterspace with another Woman of Color faculty member within this institution, Belen shared the comments other colleagues made about them.

Sometimes people misinterpret her voice and fearlessness to speak up for students, so they'll tell me, "Oh, don't hang out with that kid because it's going to look bad on you." I'm fine with that, I don't care. She's been amazing. I don't know that my experience would be the same without my fellow Woman of Color

faculty member. Even younger than I am, that part doesn't matter because her experience is amazing.

Peers were warning Belen to stay away from her colleague, a Woman of Color, due to her history of speaking up, which was perceived to be negative. This exhibits the suspicions peers held against another Woman of Color who advocated for herself within their institution. Belen decided to ignore these comments because of the positive influence this faculty has had within her experience at the college. Instead, Belen engaged in narrative identity work to contest societal (mis)representations of Women of Color speaking up and maintained a counterspace with her colleague.

Additionally, Malaya, a Filipina and tenured English professor, described how influential it was to have peer support who shared cultural values with her on her campus. Because there is a large representation of Filipino American students on her campus, she emphasized the importance of Filipino educators being connected and creating a counterspace with one another.

The other Filipino educators I work with...are very much connected. Those are my go-to folks. And now, there are more Filipino folks in administration. We got all the Filipinos together. We went to [a restaurant] one afternoon and we just had a big meeting. There were professors and counselors. We filled up one big table. We know that we're there, and we know who students are. We know that our students need to see us because they need to see that there's more to life than becoming a nurse, a doctor, joining the Navy, and that you can go into education.

The Filipino educators within her institution made a conscious effort to be in a counterspace with one another for themselves and the students that they serve. By showcasing their communal efforts, they aspired to create their meaning of the myriad of professions Filipino students can pursue and challenge dominant assumptions of Filipino career paths.

In addition to engaging in counterspaces with colleagues on campus, Malaya described how she cultivated a counterspace outside of her campus and with other Filipino American educators across the state.

I ended up meeting other community college instructors, and ironically, the community college that I went to. Now we're going on two years [of meeting over Zoom], and we were actually able to build a coalition of Filipino community college educators throughout the state. We all met on Zoom. We're still connected and trying to figure out how to create a statewide learning community for Filipino students. We're trying to talk to legislation. We even presented at a conference. You knew who the Filipino educators were by the screaming, 'Oh my god! I haven't seen you in so long.' I have a strong network now. We got to a conference, then afterward, go to a bar and debrief what happened with all of our aunties.

The intended Zoom meetings to build community with one another led to a counterspace and coalition of Filipino community college educators throughout the state wanting to develop a learning community for Filipino students. As a Filipina woman, Malaya is dedicated to serving the Filipino community. Through this counterspace, Malaya found a community with folks who created their own space and meaning for what academic support can look like in the future for Filipino students in her state.

Engaging in Acts of Resistance in the Academy

Moreover, testimonialistas discussed how counterspaces offered them the opportunity to engage in acts of resistance against oppression within the academy. For example, ProfFeb77, a Black woman and tenured Sociology professor, wrote about how her Black mentors helped her throughout the challenges she experienced through her inequitable tenure-review process.

Through the support system and sage advice from my African American mentors, I began to fight back. Fighting back was something I had never done for myself; however, I fought tooth and nail for others. They helped me see the light and potential I had within me. I used their words against them. I caught them up in their own lies of deception and I used that sage advice to learn my union contract better than my 'so called panel of peers.' I told myself I would NEVER allow another to put me down, take away my dreams, or defame my character.

Through the power of mentorship in counterspaces, ProfFeb77 felt validated when experiencing a hostile work environment. This mentorship offered her the chance to challenge her prejudiced tenure-review evaluation process. ProfFeb77 also found mentorship unexpectedly from faculty who observed the oppression she was experiencing. She said,

Find your family. Whether it's in your department or another department, find your family. You'd be amazed at the allies you find. And I found White allies, too. They found me rather. They're the ones that helped me navigate the contract. One [faculty]...who is a White man...he's the one who helped me so much. He's like "this point in your contract, you see where you can choose a second peer?" He said, "And they don't have to be in this school. They don't even have to be in our district." Of course, they don't tell you that, so, my department chair put herself as my peer. I never put her. Her name was never listed, but somehow, she got on there. I didn't even know that all these things were even possible, yet he offered that information to me. That was an ally I never knew existed.

ProfFeb77 found an ally who explained the hidden curriculum and fine print within her contract. Through this knowledge, ProfFeb77 was able to understand the ways in which she can be responsible for a part of her tenure process, demonstrating acts of resistance within the academy. In addition to mentors who already experienced the tenure process and offered words of advice, ProfFeb77 found an academic home within the committees she was a part of.

You'd be amazed at where you can find allies. Find committees. There's a [DEI] committee I belong to. That was my safe haven. The people there gave loving support and arms when I had to cry. They were there. They spoke out when and where they could.

Being in a counterspace with these folks allowed ProfFeb77 to receive emotional support and space to critique her experiences when she needed it. Overall, the connections she made with people who shared similar values aided in her persistence throughout the tenure process.

Similarly, Nicole, a Multiracial Pinay and Chicana tenure-track Counseling faculty also discussed how helpful it is to be in a counterspace with like-minded colleagues regarding engaging in acts of resistance and organizing within the college. When she encountered challenges with administrators, she reached out to her peers in her counterspace to organize and find ways to engage in collaborative efforts.

In order to organize, you have to have allies. You need people who support you. And I think a lot of the ways in which I've navigated it is having a supportive community. I'm grateful to have some really great colleagues who are supportive. A lot of the times, it could be as easy as being like, "Well they said this and eff that." But it could also be like, "Hey, how can we collaborate? I know that you stand for this." I even reach out to other people like, 'Hey, I heard you're doing this. How can I support you?' ...My work has mainly been like, how do I build relationships with people, so that way, we could do work together, or we could support each other to navigate the craziness of it?

Nicole has built a counterspace with others on campus, which has proven to be helpful when advocating for students' rights or equitable policies. Through community and counterspaces, Nicole and her peers come together to vent about challenges, conceptualize plans, and engage in acts of resistance to move forward to better support students.

Community Building and Social Support with Peers

Lastly, testimonialistas considered how counterspaces allowed them to build community with their peers to help them survive the academy. For instance, Sass, a Latina woman and a tenured Sociology faculty member, explained how being surrounded by Faculty of Color in her search committee helped her ultimately accept her position within the community college. She said,

I decided to say yes to this community college because the search committee...it was a lot of Folks of Color. Now that I know them [and the demographics of faculty here], they did that on purpose. They secured themselves on that search committee to try to get more Faculty of Color. I feel at home here. I feel like I have my dream job. I am surrounded by Professors of Color and strong allies.

The representation of Faculty of Color on her campus and their participation in search committees to recruit Faculty of Color demonstrated their commitment to increasing the racial

representation on their campus. Sass began her faculty career right before the COVID-19 pandemic and was still learning about her college's environment. Therefore, she was unable to connect with her peers on campus. The shift to online instruction was isolating, however, a group of Faculty of Color reached out to her to build community and a counterspace with one another virtually. She shared,

Finding my community...I was only two quarters in before the pandemic hit. I wasn't really able to connect with faculty in the beginning. I'm glad that in the pandemic [a group of Faculty of Color] reached out to me to join their group chat. That was helpful or else it would've been way more isolating and probably wouldn't have felt how I feel or how I feel now of having a sense of community. They have protected me from dealing with a lot of the other White folks and dealing with microaggressions. They're like "Watch out for this person" or if something happens, they're intervening.

When Sass experienced challenges with her tenure process, the counterspace cultivated with other Faculty of Color offered social support and space to offer social critiques of whiteness and interlocking systems of oppression. This counterspace allowed her to persist in her career. Even after she obtained tenure, she continues to be in community with this group outside of their professional lives. Sass wrote in her reflection,

I am so happy with my decision and so proud to have earned tenure in December 2021. I could not have done this without my support system. We've learned about each other's personal lives. We have a group chat. We talked about students and other issues. I have turned to them everything I had issues with conservative students. I have gotten a lot of pushback from White students who do not like learning about injustices in the world...We also discuss documentaries and assignments for classes. We bounce ideas off each other for many classes. It is truly a joint effort.

The counterspace Sass cultivated with other Faculty of Color on campus transcended into her personal life as well. Being able to find peers to process concerns and discuss each other's personal lives was valuable for Sass, ultimately reducing feelings of isolation and exclusion for her. In these spaces, she found an avenue to discuss her experiences with the overlapping systems of oppression that manifested within her role as a faculty member.

Furthermore, when thinking about Women of Color faculty starting their professions within the community college environment, Nicole offered advice and recommended,

Find community. Find mentors who are there to support you in all of your identities and then in all of the intentional work that you do. I think that's the biggest thing is finding the people who are there to truly support you and mentor you, whether that be formally or informally. Prioritize community and relationships. You just never know who you're going to meet. I met with one [counselor] who was in town for a conference in San Diego, but he worked

elsewhere. I now work with him and another girl that was at that lunch too. She's an English instructor, a Filipino English instructor at my campus. It's crazy because I was like, "Hey, we all work together now." And we've been at conferences together. We have our get-togethers when we're at different spaces together. I think you never know who you're going to meet and who you might work with in the future. So, focus on relationships and community.

Nicole stressed how important it is to build intentional and genuine relationships and counterspaces with others to support each other's visions and goals. In Nicole's case, the relationships built over time across institutions were instrumental in finding a future position or already knowing individuals within the institution where she was hired. Overall, testimonialistas reported how influential it was to be in community with others and engage in counterspaces as they navigated systems of oppression within the community college environment.

Discussion

In this study, Women of Color community college faculty engaged in counterspaces that were forms of support through social networks or formal and informal communities (Case & Hunter, 2012). Counterspaces acted as a shield or tool to minimize and ease the experiences of testimonialistas. To go into detail, testimonialistas shared the importance of counterspaces to connect with peers within their college campuses or across the state, build community, and combat feelings of isolation (King & Pringle, 2018; Núñez, 2011; Ong et al., 2018; Yosso & Lopez, 2010). These counterspaces served as sites of protection as testimonialistas experienced interlocking systems of oppression in the academy. Engaging in counterspaces allowed testimonialistas to contest societal (mis)representations, give meaning to their identities, engage in acts of resistance to persist in the academy, and build community and social support with peers. These three domains of counterspaces allowed testimonialistas to survive and thrive in the academy.

Scholarship on counterspaces has focused on the experiences of students across K-12, undergraduate education, and graduate education (King & Pringle, 2018; Masta, 2021; Núñez, 2011; Santa-Ramirez, 2022). Martínez-Carrillo (2019) has explicitly explored counterspaces as a mechanism for Women of Color faculty to manage racial battle fatigue. However, this scholarship focused on the context of four-year institutions. This study builds on scholarship focused on counterspaces by including Women of Color faculty and community college contexts. When testimonialistas engaged in counterspaces, they were more likely to feel positive in showing their authentic selves and demonstrated higher levels of self-efficacy within their roles (Santa-Ramirez, 2022). When Women of Color community college faculty found counterspaces, they felt protected and demonstrated high levels of motivation to continue serving students whom they share social identities with.

Implications for Practice

This study has implications for practice related to the community college setting. This study illuminates the myriad of ways in which systems of oppression manifested within Women of

Color community college faculty lives. Counterspaces acted as a form of protection and resistance against these compounding systems of oppression. Testimonialistas in this study offered recommendations for community college leaders to implement mentorship programs for faculty members with marginalized identities. For example, Chelsea, a tenure-track Counseling faculty, expressed how beneficial it would be to have a mentorship program on her campus to co-create a counterspace. She said,

Mentorship programs or safe spaces where we can speak about things. Especially with things happening recently. One shocking thing to me is that during conversations about Roe v. Wade, there were other universities asking colleagues, 'How are you feeling?' I never had that at my community college. We need a safe space. When we don't have a safe space for ourselves, how are we supposed to create a safe space for our students? A mentorship program would be helpful.

Similarly, Malaya spoke about how helpful peer mentoring can act as a counterspace for Women of Color if implemented well within community colleges. She shared,

I'm a big proponent of mentoring. Use resources. Get Women of Color together and say, 'Hey, we've got these folks who want and need mentoring.' That will help you find your folks because sometimes they can't find you. We need help putting ourselves out there. So having that established, even if it's informal. We can go over to the canteen, grab some drinks, and say, 'Hey, let's talk about what's going on. We can talk about systemic oppression. We could talk about the books we need in the library next week.'

Implementing a mentorship program within community college systems can help connect Women of Color faculty members across departments and disciplines to help create counterspaces for them. These connections and relationships can help Women of Color feel welcomed and supported on campus both personally and professionally.

Implications for Research

Exploring the experiences of community college faculty members is a necessary area of research. Due to the paucity of research surrounding Women of Color community college faculty members, this study offers insight and guidance for future research. Community college researchers may express aspirations to examine community college faculty experiences by centering participant populations, disciplines, faculty types, or institutional types. This research study explores the experiences of Women of Color more broadly. However, researchers may want to explore the experiences of specific racial or ethnic backgrounds of women faculty. For instance, what are the experiences of Latina community college faculty members and how does culture help shape these experiences? Rather than using intersectionality, Latino Critical Theory (LatCrit) or Chicana Feminist epistemologies can be appropriate.

In addition, scholars can choose to examine specific disciplines in future research. Many of the testimonialistas I engaged in community with for this study were English, communications, sociology, and counseling faculty. There was a lack of Women of Color faculty in STEM disciplines within this study. Future research can center discipline-specific experiences to investigate the differences in faculty experiences within STEM. To be specific, researchers can seek to answer: What are the differences between the Women of Color faculty in STEM and social sciences or humanity disciplines?

Lastly, it is imperative to note that institutional types can influence the experiences of Faculty of Color. Within this study, I did not examine whether the community colleges testimonialistas were employed at were Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs), or Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs). Similar to exploring specific racial or ethnic backgrounds, it would be beneficial for scholars to study Faculty of Color experiences within each institutional type. The experiences of Black community college faculty within HBCUs may differ from the experiences of Black community college faculty within PWIs. Therefore, researchers can examine these similarities and differences across institutional types and designations.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it contributes to literature on Women of Color faculty, community college environments, and counterspaces. Current literature examining faculty experiences demonstrates that Women of Color experience multiple forms of discrimination within a four-year institutional context. This study expands on the scholarship of Women of Color faculty members by explicitly focusing on community college environments. Although there are 1,044 community colleges serving a large number of racially minoritized students, community colleges employ White faculty at disproportionately high rates (AACC, 2021; Finklestein et al., 2016). Because community colleges serve such diverse groups of students, it is imperative for the field of higher education to understand the experiences of community college faculty and the experiences of the individuals cultivating a classroom environment with students. This study centers the experiences of Women of Color faculty within the community college environment. Moreover, this study contributes to the scholarship on counterspaces to depict how counterspaces act as forms of protection against systems of oppression within academia. In this study, counterspaces acted as a shield or tool to minimize and ease the experiences of testimonialistas.

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Mentor Reflection

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Mentorship is a long-standing practice used in many disciplines that offers benefits for the development of higher education faculty members. It is “essential for personal and professional development within higher education” (Rinfret et al., 2023, p. 400). With proper establishment of relationships, goal setting, progress monitoring of action, and self-reflection, this process can increase research productivity and scholarship (Fountain & Newcomer, 2016). In fact, effective mentoring can lead to great fulfillment during the tenure process (Ashley et al., 2023). The following essay includes a reflection of the JEDI Emerging Scholars Program, part of the International Council of Professors of Education Leadership JEDI Committee. While the purpose of this program is to mentor the authorship of an emerging scholar, this mentorship has extended into mentoring for the comprehensive workload of a tenure-track faculty member. The following includes a reflection of the expectations of the project, the mentoring agreements on communication, goals, and support, the relationship between the mentor and mentee, progress tracking, and recommendations for improving this program.

Expectations of this Project

Part of the success of mentorship is knowing the project’s desired outcomes and the expectations to achieve those outcomes. In reflecting about this project, it was unclear to me, as the mentor, what the expectations were outside of mentoring the authorship of one article. On June 9, 2023, I received an email from Dr. Robert Martin inquiring about my lack of connection with my mentee Dr. Rebecca Cepeda. This communication was the first I had heard of who I would be mentoring. It was discovered that a misspelling of my name, very common throughout my life, led to me not receiving previous emails. To be honest, I remember volunteering to serve as a mentor, so I do not know how much time lapsed because of this miscommunication. Nevertheless, Rebecca and I connected for the first time on June 14, 2023, to introduce ourselves and establish some mentoring agreement. As of our meeting on January 12, 2024, it is still unclear if we have fulfilled all the expectations of this project. Although it is not clear whether we are supposed to continue our mentorship following this essay, we plan to do so in the spring semester and beyond. Ultimately, we are expanding the original expectation of mentoring the authorship of an article to mentoring the tenure-track process with attention to the faculty workload areas of teaching/advising, research/scholarship, and service.

Established Mentoring Agreements

Part of the success of the mentorship with Dr. Cepeda includes the communication dynamic we established, the goals we set for publication of the article, and finally the support I provided during the process of writing, editing, and submitting the article for publication. As for communication, as stated above, Rebecca and I connected by phone for the first time on June 14, 2023. We introduced ourselves and established next steps for meeting the suggested

deadlines of the writing project. At that time, Rebecca was working on finishing an article related to her dissertation, “Your Need People Who Support Counterspaces for Women of Color Community College Faculty.” Future communications throughout the semester included emails and Zoom meetings. It was agreed upon that she would reach out when needed, and I followed up throughout the semester with emails to ensure the process was moving along.

In terms of goals, we established during the first meeting that the primary goal would be to meet the deadline and submit the manuscript draft for review. As the semester progressed, I helped mentor Rebecca to meet that goal by reviewing her manuscript and providing feedback for improvement before submitting, as well as asking the committee questions (such as clarifying page numbers). Goals moving ahead into spring 2024 are to 1) discuss the tenure process and 2) possibly collaborate on another publication. The overall support provided during this program was focused on meeting the primary goal of submitting the manuscript for the Special Issue.

Relationship

I am a full believer in the influence of relationships on outcomes in any situation. Rebecca and I did not know each other before this program. We established the relationship on the phone by discussing our personal and professional lives. At the time of first developing the relationship, Rebecca was finishing up as a Graduate Research Assistant at The Ohio State University and moving to Texas A & M University, accepting a position as an Assistant Professor in Educational Leadership. We discussed our personal and professional lives to make connections with one another. It would be nice to have an opportunity to meet her in person to continue the relationship, but Zoom has made building the relationship easier.

Progress Tracking

Progress tracking is important when working towards goals on a project. This project of mentoring Rebecca to successfully submit and publish a peer-reviewed journal article involved progress tracking, which we basically communicated through email during the fall semester. We followed the deadlines (guidelines) provided by Dr. Robert Martin for the project and reached out with questions when needed. Reminder emails that were sent from Dr. Robert Martin were helpful in reminding Rebecca about the goal and deadlines along the way. Flexibility was key, being that both Rebecca and I are tenure-track professors, and that Rebecca was a new faculty member starting in August. Communicating in various formats is one way we remained flexible and responded to needs of the project as they presented themselves.

Mentor Self-Reflection

My role, as a mentor, in this process of mentoring Rebecca during the authorship of a peer-reviewed journal article was overall, minimal. Rebecca had an adequate draft of the article when we first met each other. I provided feedback one time before submitting. This is why we expanded the goals of this mentorship to include relationship and communication around teaching/advising, research/scholarship, and service in the tenure role. The next time this

project occurs, I would recommend quickly following up with mentors and mentees to ensure they have met one another at the beginning. One way to do this is hosting a meeting with breakout rooms and introducing the program and expectations. I felt behind on this work and unclear of expectations throughout the project because unfortunately, my name was being misspelled on emails, which caused a lack of response on my part. Another recommendation would be to have a tips and tricks sheet for successful mentorships based on the feedback and reflection of experiences you received from this cohort.

Conclusion

This project is one of the most worthwhile service opportunities that I have engaged in. I am grateful for Dr. Martin's leadership and support of growth for emerging scholars. It is my hope that as Rebecca and I continue this journey of mentorship through the tenure-track process, we continue to build our relationship and meet our goals in scholarship around important topics in this Special Issue around justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion.

Diversity is a fact. Equity is a choice. Inclusion is an action. Belonging is an outcome.

-Arthur Chan

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**El Viaje de Éxito: Building a Strong Foundation Through Equitable Coaching and Mentoring
at a College of Education in a Hispanic Serving Institute**

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Abstract

This narrative inquiry focuses on the coaching and mentoring experiences of a Graduate Research Assistant (GRA) within an informal mentoring program in a College of Education at a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). The study examines the impact of mentoring and coaching on the GRA's professional development utilizing Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth Theory and Gelso's Research Training Environment as frameworks to understand that impact. The findings reveal overwhelmingly positive outcomes from the coaching and mentoring relationship. The study contributes to the existing knowledge on coaching and mentoring in academic settings. It underscores the importance of recognizing and leveraging the community cultural wealth of historically marginalized individuals in research and academia.

Keywords: coaching, mentoring, teaching and learning

Introduction

Mentoring and coaching are essential in teaching and learning, especially for those seeking a doctoral degree. The literature supports this by indicating positive results for undergraduates, career transitions, and graduate students:

Within the academic profession, mentorship most often occurs in the informal but special sponsorship that a graduate student receives from a senior professor during Graduate School. The mentor provides a role model, academic advice, and eventually assistance in gaining access to the profession. (Blackburn et al., 1981).

Mentoring is very important for educational leaders as it aids in developing effective leadership and continued learning opportunities (London, 2002). This study seeks to add to the literature on mentoring and coaching by exploring the experiences of one Latina doctoral student as she engages two faculty members, one who serves in the role of mentor and the other in the role of coach. The study explores the benefits of a mentor/coach relationship where mutual interests and goals lead to a better understanding of effective mentoring and coaching in the hopes of assisting others in overcoming inequities in educational opportunities, as are sometimes found in higher education. By supporting the success of diverse students, mentors contribute to a more inclusive academic environment. The findings of this study can be particularly enlightening for the field of educational leadership, as leaders have an important role in supporting mentorship and coaching.

As the researcher/participant, I, the lead author (henceforth “author”), will use my current work as a Graduate Research Assistant (GRA) at a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI), as well as my understanding of the sociocultural, political, and historical forces that have impacted me in Brownsville, Texas, an urban community on the U.S. Mexico border. The focus point is my career story of a woman who is an experienced educator but is transitioning into higher education. This narrative inquiry attempts to understand how the informal mentoring and coaching I received as an educator and a graduate student influenced me, in hopes of informing higher education faculty on how to support a smooth transition from K-12 teaching to higher education faculty. I chose narrative inquiry, as it is a unique methodological manner of getting inside the practitioner’s world through the analysis of their stories (Riley & Hawe, 2005). I will tell my story as a narrative inquiry. I am comfortable with storytelling as a form of communication and reflection, which I experienced frequently in my upbringing as a Latina woman.

The author focused on her experiences in an informal mentorship program and an informal coaching program in the first two years of her doctoral studies in an attempt to better understand how mentoring and coaching helped her transition from K-12 public education to higher education. The author used the following research questions to guide her study:

Research Question 1: In what ways did the mentor and coach guide and support me in ways that helped me transition from public education to higher education?

Research Question 2: What specific aspects of mentoring and coaching had the greatest impact on me as I transitioned to higher education?

Problem Statement

Latina students in institutions of higher education have typically not received equitable support and access in relation to their white counterparts (Abelson et al., 2022). This is seen in lower graduation rates of Latina students (Bensimon et al., 2012). One method that has helped Latina students become successful is using a formal or informal mentoring program (Jasman, 2024). When students are treated equitably and are shown care, love, and emotional support in mentoring relationships, this leads to higher outcomes (Aguilar, 2020a). This type and quality of mentoring and coaching are essential to marginalized groups; however, this is not often the norm, especially for students of color.

Literature Review

A review of the literature on mentoring and coaching focused on three interconnected concepts that have gained significant attention in the field of education: equity, transformational coaching, and college mentoring. The review focuses on mentorship and coaching as it impacts student success.

Equity

Educational equity means that every student receives the support and opportunities needed to develop their full academic and social potential and thrive every day (Aguilar, 2020a). To interrupt educational inequities, educators must adopt a pedagogy of caring and help to create schools in which every student is treated equitably and is provided the same privileges and opportunities. In higher education, faculty members must open themselves to meaningful and purposeful conversations, ones that are effective with wisdom, honesty, and trust. According to Aguilar (2020a, p.29), “It is possible to create classrooms and schools that provide equitable and rigorous learning experiences for children, and that result in equitable outcomes for students.” Regardless of background—whether children come from low-income homes, are raised in foster care, or come to school lacking the literacy and numeracy skills typically expected of new students—every child can learn and, in turn, self-actualize (Aguilar, 2020a).

Building equitable and strong foundational schools must not fall only on teachers but must also reflect good leadership (Clayton et al., 2020). Leaders must help to sharpen the tools their teachers possess, such as commitment, resourcefulness, and their love for the profession. Establishing strong relationships with students benefits them in various ways, from employment opportunities (Bova, 2000) to professional growth (Harris & Brewer, 1986). Eby et al. (2007) found that mentoring is associated with a wide variety of favorable attitudinal, behavioral, motivational, and career outcomes.

Transformational Coaching

The term coach has been loosely applied to the field of education (Aguilar, 2020a). For the purposes of this study, coaching refers to assistance by a competent and experienced educator in mastering specific skills targeted for professional growth. Teachers typically receive coaches for one of two reasons: first, as a new teacher to a school, and second, as a teacher requiring intervention for low performance. Coaching effectiveness can vary greatly. For example, some new teachers may be assigned a coach with whom they rarely meet, leading to poor outcomes, while others may meet regularly and have meaningful discussions and opportunities for reflection that help the new teacher develop specific skills necessary for new teacher success. Effective coaching of new teachers can be especially helpful with mandated curricular initiatives, where coaches can help ensure fidelity across classrooms (Aguilar, 2020a).

Some states use coaching as part of their evaluation process to support underperforming teachers. These teachers will receive better assistance from a transformational coach. A transformational coach offers professional development to those teachers in need of intervention. Coaches take the time to meet with their mentees, act as guides, and have meaningful conversations about pedagogy, curriculum, and classroom management that lead to mentee reflection and improved teaching practice (Aguilar, 2020a).

Transformational coaching, as espoused by Aguilar (2020a, p. 34), includes three interconnected components:

The Coach: A Transformational Coach must attend to their own beliefs, behaviors, and ways of being.

The Client: Transformational Coaching addresses a client's behaviors, beliefs, and ways of being.

The System: The Transformational Coach identifies and understands the larger system in which we live and work and takes action to transform it.

A Transformational Coach takes the entire system into account and knows that impacting only the individual will not sufficiently allow for equitable change. One must explore the system and transform the entire organization's way of thinking to begin to make an impact (Aguilar, 2020a).

College Mentoring

Marginalized women in higher education typically have limited access to formal mentorship, which substantiates the need for mentorship programs that engage mentees and mentors alike (Núñez et al., 2015). Research on faculty-graduate student mentoring relationships has provided valuable insights into effective practices that foster the success of graduate students (Lechuga, 2011). Mentoring is a particular process in which an experienced person (the

mentor) guides another person (the mentee) in the development of their ideas, learning, and personal and professional competence (Tareef, 2013).

The practice of mentoring is a common strategy for institutions of higher education to address the developmental needs of students and can positively impact academic outcomes through a variety of programs ranging from first-year transition programs to undergraduate research initiatives (Crisp et al., 2017). Jacobi (1991) discussed the complexity of mutually beneficial mentoring relationships and defined the role of the mentor as intentionally providing emotional and psychological support, career advice, and role modeling. The notion of mentoring can be understood as a one-to-one relationship between a mentor and a protégé (Alcocer & Martinez, 2018). Garcia et al. (2019) posited, “To become truly transformative spaces of serving, Hispanic Serving Institutions must consider the experiences of all people within the organization, particularly as faculty, staff, and administrators at HSIs can ultimately influence the experiences and outcomes of students” (p. 28).

Some benefits of mentoring programs assisting the leaders of tomorrow include better organizational communication, retaining the correct staff, and helping to bridge the gap between training and real-world experience (Dymock, 1999). Lester et al. (2011) suggest that informal mentorship programs that occur organically may be more effective than formal mentoring programs.

Methods

The Method section addresses research design, theoretical framework, important contextual factors that influence the research, data collection, data analysis, and trustworthiness.

Research Design

This article reflects a strong stance that the author takes in narrative inquiry as a form of her writing.

Narrative Inquiry is an approach to making sense of and analyzing data that recognizes the value of stories to frame our lives, provide lenses and metaphors for understanding larger concepts, and to serve as tools for sharing with the broader public for sophisticated analysis and knowledge creation. (Henderson, 2010)

The author uses a variety of strategies for framing her inquiry, collecting pertinent data, and reflecting on the importance of the data.

In this narrative inquiry, I am focusing on mentors and coaches in higher education. Narrative inquiry serves as a portal through which I entered the world of higher education and interpreted my experiences with a coach and mentor to help build a strong foundation for my future endeavors in academia. The participant for this study is the lead author, a full-time graduate student working on a doctoral degree with a concentration in higher education

leadership. She attends her classes in the afternoon and evening. During the day, she works as a GRA, where her research project has her at public K-12 schools.

Theoretical Framework

Two theoretical frameworks were used to guide this study, Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth Theory and C. J. Gelso's (2006) Research Training Environment Theory. Both theoretical frameworks helped me to understand the lived experience of a mentee learning from the experiences with her faculty mentor and her faculty coach. Community Cultural Wealth theory provides a framework to better understand the lived experiences of a mentee in an informal mentorship program. It provides a model to better understand how to influence a student's mindset toward research in a positive manner. Yosso (2005) describes six forms of Community Cultural Wealth: aspirational, linguistic, social, familial, navigational, and resistant (Vela et al., 2023). Aspirational, linguistic, social, and navigational capital will be the focus for this study. Aspirational capital refers to the ability to remain positive about the future even during challenges. Linguistic capital refers to intellectual and social abilities that are cultivated with diverse languages (Vela et al., 2023). This would be especially pertinent for students who know multiple languages (for me, English and Spanish) and can communicate successfully with their mentors and coaches in those languages. These students draw on their linguistic strengths. Social capital refers to networks of people and community resources. For example, drawing on social contacts and community resources may help a student identify and attain a college scholarship. These networks may help a student in preparing the scholarship application itself, while also reassuring the student emotionally that she/he is not alone in the process of pursuing higher education. Navigational capital refers to skills of maneuvering through social institutions.

Gelso's (2006) Research Training Environment theory was designed to develop a positive attitude toward research in graduate students. Three main components of the theory are research interest/attitude, research self-efficacy, and research productivity (C. J. Gelso et al., 2013). Two specific dimensions of this theory are especially aligned with the focus of this study: the Positive Regard dimension and the Structure and Clarity dimension. Positive Regard focuses on fostering a supportive and encouraging environment, which is crucial for student motivation and scientific development. Structure and Clarity focuses on offering clear feedback and validation of scientific efforts through positive reinforcement, promoting confidence and growth. According to C. J. Gelso (2006), faculty mentors need to be involved in their mentees' research. They need to show excitement and positive involvement in the research. Faculty also need to positively reinforce the students' scientific activities. When graduate students become involved in research, they need to feel like their work is important, valued, and recognized (Gelso, 2006). In this study, Yosso's and Geslo's theories are used as a lens to understand the mentees' lived experiences with a faculty mentor and a faculty coach at an HSI.

Important Contextual Factors that Influence the Research Study

A variety of experiences helped to shape my perspectives about education and led me to enter a doctoral program in Educational Leadership. The following reflections about those experiences, along with an introduction to my coach and mentor, offer important context for understanding this study.

Education from Home

The most important learning opportunities I experienced came from my early childhood days when my father was a High School automotive instructor and my mother taught kindergarten at a local Elementary. I woke up every morning to the smell of my “moomsie” making breakfast and my parents discussing the occurrences of yesterday and what could be expected for today. My parents were the epitome of a *matrimonio*, husband and wife. They communicated through inquiry and sharing stories, listening to each other intently, and in the process, being perfect role models for me and others in the neighborhood. They demonstrated the importance of religion in our lives. The neighbors from two doors down, who were church choir members, and my parents would gather at our house to discuss the upcoming Sunday readings. They called it a Bible study, but they studied the Bible for 45 minutes and ate for the next two hours. Gathering around the table for *arroz, frijoles charros, y enchiladas* with family and friends always played an essential role in our lives. Through these family traditions and storytelling and inquiry, we established strong relationships with our neighbors and the church family, and this method of learning, teaching, and intense listening impacted my life.

I learned from my great-grandmother the stories of the past from the plentiful stories she told me as a child. I asked her about our family traditions and our values. She believed that everything was given to us through God and that we deserved what was given to us because God gave it to us. My great-grandmother’s words resounded in my head as my colleagues in education and I spoke. It was the right time to begin my terminal degree, delve into more research about family traditions, and learn more about our Hispanic culture through storytelling. It was the right time to begin a cultural, epistemological, and ontological journey through what might open my eyes to a world of opportunities.

The Road Map to Higher Education

I, the participant, am a real person, but I am also a metaphor for hundreds of thousands of Hispanic women who have given up and/or have chosen to “settle” for what they have and not advance. This article depicts how one individual's hard work and perseverance, believing in oneself, and seeking and accepting support from mentors and coaches can turn dreams into reality.

As an educator in the public school system, I often felt that teachers had little autonomy and they could not be creative in their teaching. I was told in the community college system, “Teach and do your job. You won’t see much of me (my supervisor) as long as you are

teaching and minding your own business.” It was a great experience. I had my own office, I held office hours, and I taught the classes assigned to me. Some of the instructors had doctorates. At times, we met in the hallway and discussed issues with students, how to solve them, and our teaching agenda for the week. I discovered through this storytelling and sharing that there is much more to education than just testing and structure. I felt that I was listened to and heard by my colleagues and that what I had to say was valued, which validated what I always knew: I had something to contribute. This sharing helped motivate me to take the leap and apply for a doctorate.

During the time of the Covid pandemic, I was assigned more responsibilities that allowed the high school dual enrollment teachers to report to me and ask me questions regarding the online Music Appreciation course I developed. I was also instructed to train the teachers and act as a “middle person” between the community college and dual enrollment teachers. Many teachers were not prepared for the changes and were resistant. They all wanted to stick to what was working according to them. The community college was seeking change, and the Dean wanted the Music Appreciation course structured in a certain way. I complied with his request. This experience helped prepare me for the road ahead.

The decision to apply for a doctoral program was difficult—my mother had been diagnosed with an illness, and there were other obstacles; it was also a decision I felt like I should have made years ago. Since the tender age of six, I wanted to seek out this terminal degree, not for any other reason but “self-satisfaction.” The impression left on me when I was six and remembering that I told my mother I wanted to one day wear that “funny looking hat” –I went for it. It was a decision that would change my life.

Coach and Mentor

My experience with my mentor and my coach took place during the first two years of my doctoral program. I served each for one-year GRA appointments. I refer to Dr. Smith as my mentor because I worked with her first, and she has served to guide and support me in a wide variety of ways across the two-year period as I have transitioned toward a career in higher education. I refer to Dr. Miller as my coach because the federal research grant on which we worked in my second year involved me learning about and taking the role of coach with 4th-grade teachers who were participants in our grant. Dr. Miller modeled the skills of an effective coach and helped me develop my skills in coaching.

Dr. Miller has an extensive set of abilities ranging from basic coaching skills to knowledge of instructional strategies and various pedagogy. Dr. Miller got to know me as an individual and learned about my strengths and weaknesses, my beliefs, and my way of being. He was able to form a trusting relationship with me and saw my commitment to the cause. We were always able to reflect on the good and the bad that took place on that day or week. I noticed that Dr. Miller was regularly engaged in his teaching and his learning. He once expressed to me, “Just because I have a terminal degree doesn’t mean that learning stops.”

Dr. Smith, my college mentor, is an exceptional female professor who possesses a vast array of abilities and extensive knowledge of both me personally and the higher education landscape. With a deep understanding of my strengths, weaknesses, and goals, Dr. Smith has provided tailored guidance and support. Her personalized approach ensures that she can address my specific needs and challenges, helping me navigate the complexities of higher education more effectively. Her expertise and experience make her an invaluable resource for my academic and personal growth during my doctoral journey. Both Dr. Smith and Dr. Miller identify their cultural background as European American.

Data Collection: Narrative Self-Interview

Employing a narrative inquiry approach, this study utilized a self-interview technique to elicit a detailed account of my academic journey. Following established narrative inquiry protocols, I constructed a semi-structured interview guide that explored key aspects of my experience as a graduate student, including academic pursuits, personal challenges encountered, research involvement, and experiences as a Graduate Research Assistant. This interview guide served as a springboard, prompting rich narratives that delved beyond surface-level responses.

The self-interview process itself was a rigorous exercise in self-reflection. I assumed the role of both interviewer and participant, actively prompting myself to elaborate on significant experiences and turning points. This introspective dialogue yielded a comprehensive narrative that captured the nuances and complexities of my graduate school trajectory. A semi-structured interview protocol was used (Fernández & Paredes Scribner, 2018). Examples of questions include, “Reflect on your experiences as a Graduate Research Assistant,” “Explain how your experiences have benefitted you as you prepare to enter academia?” “Do you believe you had intellectual independence when carrying out your GRA assignments?” and “How will being a Graduate Research Assistant help you achieve your long-term goals?”

Responses were documented on the computer. Although there was a focal interview that lasted approximately 90 minutes, this was an iterative process. I had extensively reflected on my experiences with my mentor and coach prior to this interview time and continued to reflect on and articulate my experiences as I analyzed the data and wrote this article.

Other data sources included various notes taken from GRA meetings, coaching notes related to the federal grant, and time logs. I also wrote reflection journals on past conversations with my coach and mentor. In addition, I met and had new discussions with my coach or mentor. Although the conversations between myself and my coach or mentor were more of an informal nature, they allowed me to understand the importance of weekly reflections and meetings. Voice memos and typed notes were used as documentation.

A common feature of my Latinx heritage is the use of storytelling as a means of teaching and listening through inquiry. This was described in detail in the previous section. In my experience, educators are used to learning from each other by telling stories and discussing the past. Storytelling is an essential component of narrative research design.

Data Analysis: Narrative Coding and Thematic Development

Following the self-interview, a thematic analysis was conducted on the transcribed narrative. Utilizing an inductive approach, I meticulously coded the data, identifying recurring themes and patterns within my experiences. This process involved a close examination of the narrative, paying particular attention to pivotal moments, challenges overcome, and lessons learned. Through this iterative process, several central themes emerged that resonated deeply with Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth Theory and Gelso's Research Training Environment. These frameworks provided a robust theoretical foundation for interpreting the narrative and drawing meaningful connections between my personal experiences and established scholarly concepts.

Trustworthiness

The author addressed trustworthiness of the research process using a variety of techniques. Lincoln and Guba's (1985) schema of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability was used as a guide throughout the study. A peer debriefing was conducted with the participant's mentor and coach to address credibility. An in-depth description of the findings through multiple data collection methods supports the transferability of results. An external audit of data collection and analysis procedures was conducted by a peer with experience in qualitative research in order to address the trustworthiness of data analysis. To address confirmability, the author kept an audit trail of coding and thematizing and reflected on personal biases that might have influenced data analysis.

Results

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experience of a doctoral student utilizing both a mentor and a coach at a Hispanic Serving Institute (HSI) in an informal program as she transitioned from K-12 public education to higher education. As the sole participant in the study, the data reflects my self-study and reflections on the interactions I had with my mentor and coach and my beliefs about how those interactions benefited me in making the transition to higher education. Several themes emerged from the data analysis and will be discussed in relation to the research questions.

Research Question 1: In what ways did the mentor and coach guide and support me in ways that helped me transition from public education to higher education?

Data analysis revealed several ways in which my mentor and coach guided and supported me through our interactions.

High Expectations as a Colleague

Both mentor and coach treated me as a colleague and had high expectations for my work. For example, Dr. Smith made me a member of her research team from Day 1, including me in discussions with other researchers and valuing my input. In addition, as Dr. Miller and I

developed a plan for recruiting schools for the federal research grant, he gave me increased autonomy as we were successful with our plan.

Provision of Multiple Opportunities

Another means of support was by providing me with multiple opportunities to grow as a professional. Both mentor and coach approached being awarded a GRA as a reciprocally beneficial exchange. My work as a GRA benefited their projects but they expected me to benefit from them by helping me develop my professional skills as I prepared to move into academia. I was provided with numerous opportunities to develop these skills in a variety of research contexts and in other scholarly pursuits. Dr. Miller and Dr. Smith both understood the importance of multiple opportunities to practice skills followed by reflection and discussion. In addition, Dr. Smith provided me with opportunities to grow my professional networks at conferences. I saw this as especially beneficial because I made connections with scholars from all over the world.

Modeling

Both my mentor and coach modeled a variety of professional behaviors. Dr. Smith continuously modeled her positive approach to research and her passion for her work. She also engaged me in discussions about the different roles of faculty and how to prepare for subsequent next steps in my progress toward my degree. Dr. Miller modeled coaching skills as he taught the GRAs what was expected when coaching teachers. Both modeled a pedagogy of care.

Apprenticeship

Another way my coach and mentor guided and supported me as I transitioned to higher education was through apprenticeship. Whether it was working on Dr. Smith's research project or on the federal research grant with Dr. Miller, I received ongoing support and guidance as I learned the skills and demands of research. Both provided instruction and models, asked me to practice skills, encouraged me to reflect on experiences, and then engaged me in deep discussions about those experiences. This led to revision and improvement in my work. Because my work as a GRA was ongoing and authentic, I was able to practice my skills over a continuous period of time and engage in a meaningful process of continuous improvement with their guidance and support.

Engagement in Deep Discussions about Scholarship and Leadership

I was also engaged in ongoing and in-depth discussions about scholarship and leadership throughout my experiences with Dr. Smith and Mr. Miller. Meetings were held weekly with both projects but involved multiple communications through text or phone call each week, as needed. Both were attentive in answering questions and engaging in attempts to ensure I understood what was expected from faculty when engaging in scholarship/research.

Research Question 2: What specific aspects of mentoring and coaching had the greatest impact on me as I transitioned to higher education?

Some specific components of mentoring and coaching stood out as especially beneficial in helping me transition to higher education.

Caring About Me, the Person

One characteristic shared by Dr. Smith and Dr. Miller that was especially important to me is that they both cared about me in ways that extended beyond our work together. During my first years in the doctoral program, my mother was diagnosed with an illness, and I became a primary caregiver for her. Dr. Smith always supported me during this time and encouraged me to be persistent. The following was a recorded reflection on these interactions:

Dr. Smith always asks how my mother is doing, and consistently serves as a reminder of how my mother would not want me to quit but how she wants to see me teaching at a university or becoming a vice president at a university. She has shown me job postings and has reminded me that in due time I will be applying.

Dr. Miller also expressed concern and was able to meet with my mother on multiple occasions. Since she had been a campus principal and teacher for many years, the three of us had much to discuss. Because family is so important to me, this pedagogy of caring helped me integrate my doctoral studies and personal life, and I was able to persist through this challenge.

Encouragement to Utilize My Cultural and Linguistic Strengths

Dr. Smith and Dr. Miller see bilingualism and biculturalism as assets in growing social networks and encouraged me to use my cultural and linguistic capital in my work and in developing my leadership skills. I was able to use Spanish in my GRA work. In one instance, I used my translation skills to share an article written in Spanish with my classmates. With the grant, I have been able to use my Spanish language skills to make stronger connections with teachers and administrators where appropriate. We can connect on a deeper level because of our shared understanding of culture and language. As an educational leader, this taught me how to value multilanguage learners and home on others' abilities and strengths.

Opportunities to Grow Professional Networks

My faculty mentor and coach have always expressed the importance of expanding one's social network at various levels. The single most important experience I have had is meeting other professionals at other universities through professional conferences. Being part of Dr. Smith's research team from the beginning made me feel much more comfortable and gave me a sense of belonging. She played music for me at the start of the first meeting. She knew how nervous I was to meet the entire team. Even though I was the only person attending the meeting who did not hold a doctoral degree, my opinion was validated. Dr. Smith also helped

me engage in social networking by attending professional conferences. She allowed me to present at the conference and become involved in other research circles.

Dr. Miller has also noted that introducing him to my mother has enhanced the dynamics of our coaching relationship. The three of us have discussed culture, our values, life lessons, and professional expectations. Dr. Miller has learned that my mother is a former school principal and that I know many educators in the district where she worked. This has led to a better understanding of already existing social networks, which has led to an expansion of our network with schools for our research project.

Learning About and Practicing Effective Communication and Collaboration

My professional growth has benefited from coaching on developing strong partnerships and has led to several professional goals. I've grown professionally by engaging in partnerships with other educators through effective collaboration and communication, and by listening and trying to understand the perspectives of others. I've learned to build on the collaborative strengths of one another and work together for improvement.

Provision of a Research Training Environment

With both GRA positions, I was encouraged to develop positive attitudes about conducting research. Dr. Smith involved me in all aspects of research and scholarship, including contributions to literature review, data collection and analysis, publishing, and conference presentations. She has positively reinforced my work in scholarship/research. One approach in particular has helped me to practice my skills—the understanding that educational research can get messy and that it is okay when things don't work out perfectly. Dr. Smith has frequently talked about how to persist through research challenges.

With Dr. Miller, I have been engaged in developing protocols for coaching and documentation for fidelity, then provided opportunities to practice using those protocols as I have coached teachers. Team discussions have followed that resulted in adjusting protocols as on-site practices necessitated. In our work on the grant, we have faced challenges like school and student attrition, have learned to go around obstacles, and to keep moving forward.

Modeling Professional Behaviors and Passion for Field

Dr. Smith constantly shares ideas for future research with me and shows her excitement about these projects. Her professional mannerisms and way of being with her students and with those she advises show the knowledge and love of the profession she possesses. Her guidance in all facets has truly helped to ensure success in my future endeavors.

Developing a Professional Protocol

Dr. Miller has observed that coaching is a reciprocal process—we learn together. He and I have developed a working protocol through our interactions and shared expertise. As Dr. Miller has recognized some of my strengths, he has allowed me to take the initiative in a

variety of work-related tasks; we discuss goals and outcomes throughout. This is a process that has allowed me autonomy and provided me opportunities to practice my skills and learn through reflection and discussion of results. This has been a very affirming process for me.

Discussion

Research shifts us from a world of deficit view of Communities of Color as places full of cultural disadvantages and instead focuses on the array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups (Yosso, 2006). This study provides insights into the experiences with mentoring and coaching of one Latina doctoral student making the transition from K-12 public education to higher education at a Hispanic Serving Institution. The experiences were unique in that the student developed a strong relationship with one faculty member from the beginning of her studies, and the student viewed this as a mentoring relationship. In addition, the student became a GRA for a research grant where her position centered around coaching teachers. As the model for coaching was developed, she coached herself on how to deliver those services. This brought about many thoughts about how her experiences with these two faculty members, who played different roles, created an environment that helped her successfully transition from K-12 public education to higher education. These insights can be used to support models of mentoring and coaching for doctoral students making a similar transition and preparing to enter academia. The findings of this study may be especially important for educational leaders who are charged with supporting mentoring and coaching programs in higher education and K-12 schools.

In reviewing the results of the study, several findings stand out as important when considering effective mentoring and coaching practices.

- Central to the work with both faculty members was a *focus on training in research*. Both were committed to teaching me the skills necessary to conduct educational research. For each, there was a focus on guiding me through authentic practice toward independence in conducting research studies.
- There was an important *affective element* in my experiences with both faculty. They demonstrated a pedagogy of caring with their concern for my mother's health and my well-being. I also felt valued as a contributing member of both professor's teams. I was encouraged to keep moving forward in my studies and was positively reinforced for my contributions.
- Both sets of experiences were highly focused on *skill-based outcomes*. It became apparent early on that I was expected to learn a variety of skills during my time with both faculty and that these skills revolved around research/scholarship. One thing I discovered is that the important skills did not pertain only to research design, data collection, and data analysis, but on a broader set of skills like interpersonal, communication, and collaboration skills. Working with central office administrators and campus principals requires a unique set of pragmatic communication skills; building partnerships requires an ongoing commitment to growing relationships. All of these

skills needed to be practiced in order to develop them as part of my transition to higher education faculty.

- There is a *time and persistence variable* for faculty and students. Developing necessary skills, especially for complex tasks such as educational research, takes time, persistence, and patience on the part of faculty and students. Such opportunities in an apprenticed environment are essential for students to take that next step toward higher education faculty.

The findings of my study align well with the theoretic framework for this study—important elements from Yosso’s Community Cultural Wealth Theory and Gelso’s Research Training Environment Theory. In regard to *aspirational capital*, Gándara (1995) states that those of Latinx descent experience the lowest educational outcomes in comparison to other ethnic groups in the United States. She also posits that those of Latinx descent set their goals high and aspire to achieve them, with *familia* (family) support or mentor and coach support. As described in the results, both the mentor and coach provided support during my mother’s illness. Their mere presence in my mother’s life reminded me of the goal I set for myself to become a doctor. They demonstrated the importance of leading others to success regardless of personal or organizational adversity.

Understanding effective professional practices of faculty when mentoring or coaching a graduate student helps practicing or potential mentors and coaches hone those practices in ways that encourage their students. Certain practices may be especially challenging when mentors and coaches come from a different cultural background than their students. It is hoped the results from this study can help shed light on specific practices of which they may not be readily aware. These faculty can then foster hopes and dreams within a potentially discouraging environment for students of color.

Likewise, understanding of *linguistic capital* may not be well understood by many monolingual faculty who serve as mentors or coaches. In my cultural community, children most often have been engaged participants in a storytelling tradition that may include listening to and recounting oral histories, parables, *cuentos* (stories), and *dichos* (proverbs) (Yosso, 2005). My second language is Spanish, and being bilingual while living on the border is very important. In addition, I am also a musician by profession with a bachelor’s degree in Music Education. I communicate through music. I can use my knowledge of the Spanish language to communicate more freely with those who feel more comfortable with that language. This can lead to building stronger relationships and partnerships that are important in conducting research in educational settings.

My linguistic capital has led to greater *social capital* as I have developed new partnerships. My faculty mentor and coach have always expressed the importance of expanding one’s social networks at various levels. As noted, Dr. Smith created multiple opportunities to increase my social capital. The existing social networks I brought to the federal grant GRA position due to my mother’s background in education as a teacher and administrator led to enhanced opportunities for recruiting schools. I was also able to hone my communication and

collaboration skills as I learned about and developed coaching skills; I've learned to build on the collaborative strengths of one another and work together for improvement.

In terms of *navigational capital*, Drs. Smith and Miller helped me navigate academic and personal challenges as well as persist and overcome challenges, encouraged me to network with others with similar research interests at professional conferences, and guided me to pursue my academic and professional goals. Working on the research grant with Dr. Miller has allowed me to focus on several professional goals around developing effective communication and collaboration skills. Understanding those coaching and mentor behaviors that lead graduate students to grow their navigational capital is important so those behaviors can be replicated. For example, understanding research methodologies equips me to navigate the unfamiliar terrain of academia. Likewise, teaching strategies for approaching schools and principals, effectively utilizing research funds, or navigating the complex world of academic publishing are skills that empower me to move forward within a system that may not have initially felt welcoming.

In regard to Gelso's Research Training Environment Theory, my coach and mentor modeled positive and appropriate scientific attitudes and behaviors. According to Gelso (2006), the scientific behavior and attitudes of faculty are probably the most fundamentally important research-enhancing (or retarding, if negative) ingredient in the RTE framework. Faculty mentors and coaches need to be involved in the research of their mentees and model appropriate attitudes and behavior for all aspects of the research process.

Dr. Smith constantly shared ideas for future research with me and showed her excitement about these projects. The results of this study note how Dr. Smith modeled professional behaviors and a passion for conducting research and engaging in her profession, a passion she passed along to me. My work with Dr. Miller has led to my development of professional goals around communication and collaboration. Developing these skills, which Dr. Miller has modeled, is important when engaging others in research.

Another important aspect of providing a research training environment is that faculty positively reinforce their mentees. This reinforcement might consist of encouraging research, providing more research opportunities, and promoting conference presentations. According to Gelso (2006), the most important reinforcers are faculty responses to student research accomplishments. Dr. Smith provided me with multiple opportunities to publish and to present at conferences. Her positive reinforcement has encouraged me to continue and pursue the higher education route. Dr. Miller has noted that coaching is a reciprocal process. Our discussions about the coaching process have led to the positive reinforcement of my work and the valuing of my perspectives.

While my experience suggests coaching proved beneficial, Yosso's framework helps us understand why both mentoring and coaching might hold value. Mentoring, for instance, can tap into my aspirational capital by providing a role model and fostering a deeper connection between student and mentor. A Latina faculty member, for example, could offer both academic guidance and personal support, fostering a sense of belonging within the

institution. Ultimately, the best method may depend on individual needs. Coaching offers a more targeted approach, focusing on specific skills development. Mentoring, on the other hand, provides a broader support system, addressing not just academic needs but also the emotional and social challenges of navigating a new environment.

Learning from the experiences of others in a way that contributes to current models of mentoring and coaching helps others (current and potential mentors, coaches, and mentees) better understand the attributes and skills necessary to create learning environments that lead to effective transitioning into higher education. Understanding the student perspective in these processes is essential in mediating what students consider important in the guidance and support of faculty. Especially important is that faculty understand their students' backgrounds, including cultural and linguistic backgrounds. My background as a bilingual Latina student at a Hispanic-serving institution is important to understand if faculty are to create an experience that prepares me to step into the role of faculty in the academy. If faculty understand the historical challenges of Latinas in academia, they can intentionally provide support and encouragement to foster hopes and dreams within a potentially discouraging environment for students of color. Mentoring practices that prioritize equity inform broader institutional efforts to create a more welcoming and supportive environment for all students.

Scholars have demonstrated that one of the most important factors that graduate students point to when describing the quality of their educational experience is their relationship with faculty (Lechuga, 2011). Research provides us with an understanding of what aids in fostering a successful graduate educational experience. Recognizing, from the perspective of the student, those practices of mentoring and coaching that have the greatest impact adds to the research base on mentoring and coaching. Focusing on high-impact practices helps to prioritize practices and build strengths within models. The single participant in this study offers much insight into her experiences during her doctoral studies with a mentor and a coach. This insight can help to foster positive interaction between mentors and coaches and their mentees.

Limitations of the Study

Although this study adds to the literature on mentoring and coaching students, there are limitations. It was conducted at one HSI with only one participant. A limited source of data was used—self-perception and observational data from the sole participant. Studying additional participants would provide a broader perspective to effective mentoring and coaching. In addition, exploring the perspectives of effective mentors and coaches would likely add to existing models of effectiveness.

Future Implications for Research

The integration of coaching and mentoring with Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth Theory and Gelso's Research Training Environment opens additional avenues for future research. Interviewing white faculty mentors at HSIs could lead to a deeper understanding of their

motivations and approaches to coaching Latina students. Exploring the experiences of Latina students who receive mentoring from both white and Latina faculty members could also allow for a nuanced understanding of how Yosso's Cultural Wealth framework plays out in different mentoring relationships.

In addition, examining the intersectionality of coaching and mentoring, what components are common, and how both can be beneficial in helping students transition to higher education could yield important insights for faculty mentors/coaches. Investigating how coaches and mentors can address the unique needs and challenges faced by individuals with multiple marginalized identities, including consideration of ethnicity, gender, and class, and how coaches/mentors can integrate intersectionality into their support strategies would also be an interesting area of study. Finally, conducting longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impact of coaching and mentoring programs on students' academic and career trajectories would help to better understand how these programs contribute to students' research productivity, career advancement, and overall well-being over time.

Conclusion

The study's goal was to explore the lived experience of a doctoral student using a mentor and coach at an HSI. Mentors step outside of the boundaries of their primary roles to develop a unique and sustained relationship with individuals (Kraft et al., 2023). The study adds to the literature on how to support and provide positive reinforcement to graduate students seeking a smooth transition into academia after graduation. Mentoring and coaching provide essential guidance, support, positive reinforcement, and aid in helping those transitioning into higher education succeed.

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Mentor Reflection

El Viaje de Exito: Building a Strong Foundation Through Equitable Coaching and Mentoring at a College of Education in a Hispanic Serving Institute

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In the 2022 article, *Creating an Inclusive Community for BIPOC Faculty: Women of Color in Academia* by P. Lin and L. Kennette, recommendations related to how to provide better support for women of color in faculty roles to combat the persistent prejudices prevalent in institutions of higher education (IHE) related to racial, ethnic, and gender biases. These persistent prejudices can look like undervalued accomplishments, feelings of isolation, lack of support, and being stereotyped as less capable/intelligent. In addition to the above-mentioned workplace tensions, faculty of color are also charged with increasing service work, specifically working in anti-racism initiatives, and invited to provide diverse perspectives (tokenism). Although the authors gave many policies and process oriented recommendations, one that resonated with me and aligned with the intent and purpose of this project is creating the opportunity for faculty of color to connect and network socially and to support each other's scholarly efforts.

They suggest informal networks are beneficial, but the intentional matching of mentor/mentee dyads led to more impactful and positive outcomes. They contend that these 'safe' spaces and opportunities do not negate the reality of navigating predominantly white spaces/cultures/professions, however it does help BIPOC scholars to feel appreciated and affirmed. This ICPEL/JEDI is to be commended for creating a safe space for the mentor and mentee. As a mentor, I was able to assert my expertise and ability as a scholar, and I hope I created a safe space for the mentee where their ideas and questions were valued and supported. Mentor and Mentee understood the expectations of this project. ~~Gina Wilson 2~~ At the beginning of the process, the mentee and I understood the general expectations of the project. However, the beginning of our journey had a bit of confusion. I was aware of the acceptance of the mentee into the project before they were contacted; this made for a somewhat confusing and awkward situation when I reached out to make our first connection; they were confused about why I was contacting them. I then worried that there had been a mistake and that maybe I contacted the wrong person. When the confusion was identified, I took responsibility for seeking clarity for the mentee. Looking back, I realize this choice to take this assertive action on my part was the beginning of the mentoring relationship for the project.

Once clarification was made and confirmed that I would serve as their mentor, we focused on calibrating our understanding of the project's expectations and our individual understandings of my role as mentor and the project's goals. Establishing Agreements and Norms Communication Because we live approximately 1,400 miles (about half the width of the United States) apart, our preliminary communication was via email, with many back-and-forth emails until we decided on the first meeting via Zoom. The mentee took the lead on using their Zoom account, which proved helpful and became an established practice as they would typically record our

sessions to create the ability for them to be present during our discussion yet still be able to reference the guidance shared during our meeting time at a later day. I sent the meeting invitation to mark on our calendar. During our meeting, communication was informal yet technical. I believe this was a style we were comfortable with, and often provided space for, personal (yet not private) information to be shared. The mentees established. This consistency proved beneficial to the mentee.

Goals

As I am reflecting, I don't believe we ever explicitly set goals that would guide and ground our time together. Implicitly, we both understood our goal was to meet the communicated deadlines and produce a publishable manuscript. I sent a personal goal to provide the mentee with constructive feedback, provide resources for deeper understanding, make my thinking visible, and create an experience that built her efficacy as a scholar.

Support The support provided to the mentee was straightforward and specific. It focused on general manuscript format, writing the literature review, and writing the methodology section, including design, data, and analysis. Twice during the project timeline, I edited the document, suggesting grammatical changes and identifying narrative sections that needed more citations or clarity. I provided the suggestions in written form using the comments feature within the Word document. Then, we would discuss the comments and, at times, execute the change in our meetings.

Establishing a Relationship

Relationship building is a foundation in my leadership style. As I reflect on what aided in establishing a relationship with the mentee, I believe the casual nature of our meetings helped to build rapport between us. Although I am not as experienced in publication, many of my manuscripts have been submitted to journals, and I await the next steps. I have extensive experience guiding future scholars through the dissertation process. This experience with pre-dissertation scholars gave me the skills to guide the mentees without overwhelming them. Many of the scholars I work with are first-generation scholars and all women. The casual nature of our meetings and the goal for those meetings were solely focused on the mentee and what they needed to create the opportunity to share snippets of their life, experiences, and the journey they are traveling to be a doctor. I also learned about the tensions in their life, like so many of us have, pulling us away from ~~our~~ ambitions and goals, peppering our professional selves with particles of practicality and obligation. I carefully created space for this type of sharing, where and when it occurred. Mentor Self-Reflection My role, as mentor, in this process As dissertation chair for my students, I am focused on ensuring my students' writing comprehensively addresses the research questions and ethical guidelines that will guide and support their study. I also provide close proofreading for clarity, completeness, and formatting. Additionally, I provide coaching related to mindset (fixed vs. growth), provide motivation through affirmations and visioning, and share productivity tips and hacks to ensure efficiency and consistent progress toward completion of the dissertation. This was my plan of what to provide for the mentee. I believe I offered a bit of each of these categories; however, most of

my mentoring was focused on the technical 'stuff' and came in the format of a journal manuscript and the methodology section. Conclusion My recommendation would be for there to be an additional step in the acceptance process or increased expectations of the initial submission to ensure the project is in a format as close as possible to the formatting of the final draft, specifically that they attend to the headings of a manuscript submitted to a journal and have clarity in how they are going to approach the final manuscript. Also, sharing the screening rubric used by the editorial team as part of the initial submission requirements would be helpful. All in all, this was a great experience. The intent and mission of demystifying the publication process for scholars is a responsibility that isn't available often. I can see this being an ongoing project for JEDI. The more complete the initial submissions for the project, the higher the quality of manuscripts for the final submission to the journals.

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Equity for English Learners: Latino Leadership in High-Need Middle Schools

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Abstract

The role of the principal in high-needs schools is vital to the success of the organization. Middle school principals play a critical role in fostering a safe learning environment as middle schoolers navigate socioemotional development alongside academic demands. High-need schools are defined as those presenting a context that challenges the success of students. This qualitative case study design explored successful Latino leadership in high-need Texas middle schools. Two Latino principals serving in high-need middle schools enhanced organizational and individual performance that fostered a culture of learning and equity for ELs as they supported teachers and created inclusive learning environments for students and families. Participants expressed having high expectations, a commitment to community, held deep roots in their communities, fostered a collaborative culture, and were aware of middle schoolers' needs. Limitations were also reported, and findings from the study offer valid information regarding potential practices for fostering an inclusive, equitable learning environment for middle school students.

Keywords: high-need schools, learning, leadership, context, English Learners, organizational performance, school culture, leading, equity

Introduction

Principals play a complex role in fostering school cultures where students and teachers feel safe. School safety is the foundation to equitable learning opportunities; however, principals in high-need schools face unique challenges regarding learning, leadership, and context (Medina et al., 2014). Historically, disparities in student outcomes in Texas public schools have been documented; however, the disparities continue to grow as the size of the Hispanic population increases across the U.S. (de Brey et al., 2019; Snyder et al., 2018). Furthermore, much of the literature in educational leadership focuses on the impact of school leadership on student performance, but there is a gap in research focusing on leaders, their leadership practices and school contexts (Hallinger, 2018). The purpose of this study was to explore the practices and behaviors of successful Latino principals in high-need Texas middle schools. High-need schools are defined by researchers from the International School Leadership Development Network (ISLDN) as schools situated in contexts of “poverty, wide economic, social, linguistic disparity, and high mobility” (Barnett & Stevenson, 2015, p. 518). Varying qualities of leadership essential for leading high-need middle schools coupled with contextual factors such as policy and community were examined. More importantly, the study investigated how Latino leaders promote a culture of learning in high-need middle schools with a focus on English learners.

Research Questions

This qualitative case study explored how Latino leaders enhance individual and organizational performance to foster a culture of learning and equity for ELs in high-need Texas middle schools. The following research questions were used to guide this study:

1. How do Latino leaders enhance individual and organizational performance to create a culture of learning and equity for ELs in high-need middle schools?
2. How do internal and external school contexts impact individual learning and leadership in high-need middle schools?

Review of Literature

In Texas, approximately 60.6% of the student population is considered economically disadvantaged, and poverty in Texas continues to grow (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2022a). An increased awareness of how poverty affects schools across the nation requires an examination of how principals lead high-need schools (Kearney et al., 2021). Several studies (Hernandez, 2005, 2008, 2010; Rodríguez et al., 2009) suggest Latino leaders embrace community in schools, strengthen the school-home relationship, and use bilingual skills when needed. In this context, Latino principals embrace cultural diversity, engage students, staff, and parents, and empower ELs by affirming their identities (Cummins, 2001; Nieto & Bode, 2012). This fosters a cohesive, inclusive culture that supports the language learner while highlighting the influence of the Latino leader through an intersectional lens (Bordas, 2015).

Principals in High-Need Schools

Leadership studies identify principals as key players in closing the achievement gap for students (Marzano et al., 2005) and according to López (2018), “School leaders must also be deeply committed to social justice, advocacy, community empowerment, and social transformation if they are to make a dent in improving the lives of Latinx youth and communities in this country” (p. 81). This form of leadership requires different approaches of school reform as federal and state accountability mandates continue creating challenges for equitable learning opportunities that value culture diversity and the promotion of ELs (Murakami, 2009; Santamaria & Santamaria, 2015; Theoharis, 2009).

Principals play an integral role in promoting and ensuring equity for ELs (Baker & Wright, 2017), and in high-need schools, this is even more challenging by having to meet unaddressed academic, socio-emotional, and physical needs before focusing on student achievement (Medina et al., 2014). Moreover, ELs need school leaders who can empathize with them but also maintain high expectations for them at the same time (Murakami et al., 2018). This initiative requires school leaders who are mindful of the needs of ELs as they advocate and promote an inclusive school culture due to their familiarity with students’ cultural and family values (Murakami, 2009). In addition, professional identity plays a significant role in leadership (Murakami et al., 2018), as principals’ cultures, beliefs, identities, and values guide behavior (Welborn et al., 2022). As the demographics across U.S. schools continue to change, we need culturally responsive leaders who focus and build on the unique experiences that cultural and linguistic students bring to learning spaces.

Middle School and English Learners

In 2014, there were 4.8 million ELs in public schools, and Spanish was the native language of 3.7 million ELs (Snyder et al., 2018). Of the 5.4 million students in Texas public schools, 60.6% are identified as economically disadvantaged (ECD), and 21.7% are ELs (TEA, 2022a); however, only 37% of ECD and 35% of ELs met standards across all grades and subjects on the 2022 STAAR (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2022b). Despite educational reform and mandates, school leaders across the nation struggle to provide ELs with equitable learning opportunities (Hernandez & Murakami, 2016; Noguera, 2017).

Middle Schools in High-need Contexts

Bishop and Harrison’s middle school concept (2021) provides a framework describing the attributes and characteristics of successful middle schools that are “responsive to the nature, needs, and identities of young adolescents” (p.5). In addition, Rheaume (2022) suggests middle school leaders take a responsive approach to meet the needs of the “cultural, linguistic, sexual orientation, and other needs of the young adolescents in their care” (p. 14). The middle school transition serves as an important academic and social crossroads for students and, according to middle school researcher Balfanz (2009), often serves as the last opportunity for school engagement before high school. This transition is especially important for ELs who have

traditionally been marginalized, underserved, and heavily populated in high-need schools (Murakami-Ramalho et al., 2010). Students at the secondary level and beginning in middle school go through adolescent changes that bring an additional array of challenges for parents, teachers, and school leaders (Wentzel, 1997).

This transition is particularly dangerous at the middle school level where there seems to be a lack of fit between early adolescents' developmental needs and the demographic changes in their ethnic group representation from elementary and the new middle school environment (Morales-Chicas & Graham, 2016). The middle school years are especially important for ELs as they enter the general education classroom at the middle school level with decreased language support (Artiles & Dyson, 2005) and limited resources. This is especially true for Latino students largely populated in challenging high-need schools (Hernandez & Murakami, 2016; Murakami-Ramalho et al., 2010).

As we focus on the practices and behaviors of successful Latino principals, we quickly learn there is a disproportionate representation of Latino school leaders. Moreover, across the United States, only 5.2% of teachers and 6.8% of principals are Latino (Snyder et al., 2018). While the percentage of Latino principals in Texas is higher, there is still an underrepresentation when compared to the growing number of Latino students. Moreover, scholars who focus on Latino leadership found that Latino principals are more likely to work in high-need schools (Byrne-Jimenez & Méndez-Morse, 2016; Hernandez & Murakami, 2016). As such, it is vital we highlight the contributions of successful Latino principals in high-need schools as their professional experiences, cultural backgrounds, and identities enhance their leadership practices (Méndez-Morse et al., 2015).

Conceptual Framework

The cross-national conceptual framework (Murakami & Torres-Arcadia, 2019) was used for the study due to its language and culture-specific concepts. Other concepts include tenets identified in Murakami and Torres-Arcadia's (2019) cross-national research that was specifically designed for the study of Latino leaders in high-need schools. The tenets of the cross-national framework served as the structure to cross-compare themes and patterns of the cases in a logical, meaningful way.

- *Raíces y Familia* are associated with the deep roots of the community and the value of family in high-need schools (Murakami & Torres-Arcadia, p. 154).
- *Leadership/ Gestión* refers to Latino leaders' ability to advocate for students through a shared collaboration and familiarity with the socio-cultural and political dynamics of community representation (Murakami & Torres-Arcadia, p. 159).
- *Latinidad y Comunidad* is a form of social capital as Latinos work together to meet the needs within the community (Murakami & Torres-Arcadia, 2019).
- *Valorando el aprendizaje* refers to creating a culture of learning and high expectations.
- *History and Ontologies* are acknowledged by school leader and the culture and history of Mexicans is celebrated (Murakami & Torres-Arcadia, p. 156).

Finally, by adding the middle school concept to the cross-national framework, the researcher identified leadership tenets specifically sensitive to the learning needs of ELs in middle school contexts.

Research Methodology and Design

This study utilized a qualitative research design to explore and gain a deeper understanding of how Latino principals lead successful high-need schools (Creswell, 2013). The Relevant Situation for Different Research Strategies tool (Yin, 2018, p.6) was used to help identify a case study approach as it allowed participants to share their lived experiences (Creswell, 2013) through semi-structured interviews. The interviews were used to “seek opinions, perceptions, and evidence of day-to-day practice from active participants in the field” (Briggs et al., 2012, p.9). According to Roberts (2010), interviews provide greater depth to the phenomenon studied. While Briggs et al. (2012) suggest interviews give voice to those who have been marginalized. In addition, Salmons (2017) categories of online data were incorporated to identify and collect extant data. Extant data included collecting different forms of online communication such as images, posted texts, blogs, social networking sites, and other forms of communication applications. According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2019), the “internet is a social phenomenon growing” (p. 197) as a field site in qualitative research. Online data collection played a significant role as it added to the thick description of the case studies.

Population and Sample

A purposeful sampling procedure was used to select the study’s sample (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Creswell, 2013). Participants had to meet certain criteria. The participant had to be a principal at a public Texas middle school and serve in that position at the identified school for two or more years. Ten percent of the campus population must be ELs. The middle school campus earned all distinctions from the Texas Education Agency distinction for closing performance gaps for the 2017-2018 school year (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2018). The middle school was a high-need school. High-need schools are defined by researchers from the International School Leadership Development Network Data (ISLDN) as schools situated in contexts of “poverty, wide economic, social, linguistic disparity, and high mobility” (Barnett & Stevenson, 2015, p.158). Data was gathered using Texas Education Agency Distinction by Campus Type (TEA, 2018) to initially identify middle school campuses that met the criteria.

Sample Selection

Four hundred and forty-eight schools (n=448) from the 2018 TEA Districts and Campuses Receiving All Available Distinctions report were exported onto an Excel spreadsheet and then reduced to middle schools that met criteria (n = 43). Of these campuses, only 18 (n=18) campuses were considered high-need campuses due to a high population of Latino students, a high population of economically disadvantaged students, and 10% or more EL population. Of the 18 campuses, only eight (n=8) of the principals were Latino and had been at the selected campus for a minimum of two years. Potential research participants were invited by email or phone. Two principals agreed to participate (n=2).

Data and field notes from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed and coded (Creswell, 2007; Saldaña, 2016). Collected artifacts, such as images and pictures that were akin to the study or served as specific symbols, were used to identify themes. Following Saldaña's (2016) procedural guidelines for conducting the research, protocol coding was used as a priori codes were pre-established for the research of high-need schools.

The Cases

This study reports on the instrumental case studies of two high-need middle schools, one urban and one rural, and the principals involved in enhancing individual and organizational performance to foster a culture of learning for Latino ELs. Participants included two principals and two teachers. Selected principals for this study were in their current positions between four and five years. Principals were asked to nominate an exemplary teacher who contributed to the success of ELs at their campus. Each principal nominated one teacher. Semi-structured interviews took place between October 2019 and February 2020 (Zamora Robles, 2020). The participants for this study included two principals and two teachers: Principal Camila Caballero, and Principal Theresa Torres. Teachers were nominated by their principals: Maestra Isabela Ramirez and Maestra Mariela Martinez.

Case One: Dolores Huerta Middle School

Dolores Huerta Middle School is a high-need middle school nestled in a large urban city in North Texas. It was built in 1947 and served upper-middle-class White families (Dallas Magazine, 1982). According to the same article in the Dallas Magazine, in 1961 it was one of eight schools in the district that was ordered to accept Black students and upon doing so, attendance dropped as White families began moving to the suburbs or sending their children to private schools.

The school serves approximately 421 students, a large population of students who live below the poverty level (86%), are ELs (28%) and have a high concentration of Latino students (83%). At Dolores Huerta Middle School, special focus is placed on student interest and ability toward career exploration. In addition, students have opportunities to take Pre-AP courses for high school credit. Many of the students who attend Dolores Huerta Middle School are Latinos and ELs. The school website provides information in both English and Spanish. Meetings and events at school are also available in both languages. All documents and correspondence are translated to help parents navigate the school system.

The campus had a warm feel to it, and the walls were covered with student work. The building was clean and inviting. There were different culture themes decorated throughout the school while the library beautifully displayed books and art by various leaders such as activist Cesar Chavez and poet Kwame Alexander. Students had leadership roles, and there was a sense of pride throughout the school. Student ambassadors served as members of campus committees to give input on behalf of the student body. Their main role was to serve as representatives on behalf of the students at Dolores Huerta. Principal Caballero was proud of her student

ambassadors. In addition, the school has been recognized for many awards by different national and state organizations.

Case Two: Cesar Chavez Middle School

Cesar Chavez Middle School is located in a small rural border town in south Texas. The first school opened in 1915 and consolidated in 1970 (Garza, 2015). The consolidated school district serves approximately 10,000 students. Cesar Chavez Middle School served close to 800 students and was identified as a high-need middle school due to a large population of Latino students (98%), a high percentage of students living below the poverty line (n=85%), and high number of ELs (18%).

According to Garza (2015), after the Mexican War four tiny communities merged to form the small town of Yuma, known for its farming community through the 1960s. Additionally, Garza (2015) noted that the town opened its first school in 1904, and a nearby school district consolidated with Yuma ISD in 1970; two years later, a second district also consolidated with Yuma ISD. Additionally, the campus was recognized for its high academic performance by meeting TEA's requirements for receiving all available distinctions. Furthermore, in the late 1980s, the Immigration and Naturalization Service Processing Center was established right outside the city (Garza, 2015).

Theresa was born and raised in Yuma, Texas. She loved her town and the people who lived there. Her journey to the principalship began as an adult probation officer where she realized the adults she served lacked intervention at a much younger age. The desire to serve her community went back to her childhood years. Theresa's father served on the school board before she was born, and she recalled both parents serving as city commissioners. Eventually, her mother served as mayor of their town. Her parents loved and served the people of Yuma. This inspired Theresa to give back and serve the same community.

Results

Different themes emerged from the principal interviews, teacher interviews, public documents, and contexts of the campus location. A priori coding was used as transcripts were read through a framework for Latino leaders, based on the tenets of the cross-national framework by Murakami and Torres-Arcadia (2019). This study confirmed the following tenets as key features and practices: leadership/gestión, a culture of learning, leading, and high expectations, and a collaborative culture. However, during the cross-case analysis, a new tenet emerged with the focus on middle school: awareness of middle schoolers' needs. In addition, the themes corresponded to the study's overarching questions.

The following themes and subthemes were identified as important leadership practices and features of successful Latino principals in Texas middle schools. In addition, they address the research questions, how do Latino leaders enhance individual and organizational performance to create a culture of learning and equity for ELs and how do internal and external school contexts impact individual learning and leadership in high-need middle schools?

Themes of successful Latino middle school principals in Texas middle schools

1. Leadership/Gestión
 - a. Grassroots Leadership
 - b. Commitment to Comunidad
2. Culture of Learning, Leading, and High Expectations
3. Collaborative Culture
 - a. Raíces y Familia
 - b. Culture of learning: valorando el aprendizaje
4. Awareness of Middle Schoolers' Needs

Theme 1: Leadership/Gestión

Grassroots leadership. When asked how the internal and external school contexts impact learning and leadership, three of the four participants were familiar with the internal and external contexts of their communities and campuses due to their roots and closeness with the community. Camila lived in her city from the age of seven, and Teresa was a native of her district. They were invested in building the capacity of the communities they served. In addition, all four participants used their knowledge of the history of their campuses and their personal experiences to help engage students and parents. Familiarity with context was noted at both community and campus levels. Both principals provided a detailed description of their communities and their campuses.

Latinidad y Comunidad

The principals at both middle schools enhanced individual and organizational performance that fostered a culture of learning and equity for ELs. The following theme emerged from their narratives and counterstories: *Latinidad y Comunidad* was a form of social capital used by both principals to meet the needs of the community. Their narratives revealed their commitment to enhancing individual and organizational performance to enhance learning for students, teachers, and parents.

All four participants were familiar with their community's history and were also able to describe the demographics. As school leaders, Camila was aware of the role of politics and policy for EL programming and support and Theresa knew how to use her community's political stance to strengthen campus culture. Both principals understood the important role of community focused leadership at both the societal and campus levels.

Commitment to Comunidad

Both principals acknowledged their placement at high-need campuses to improve student performance. According to Principal Camila, Dolores Huerta Middle School has a history of being a high-performing campus. She knew she had to do something different to challenge the status quo. Theresa felt like one of her strengths was curriculum and instruction, but during the first three years at Cesar Chavez, she focused on discipline and safety. She described the culture of the school as "not good" and believed one of her biggest contributions to the campus was

changing the culture. She believed teachers knew she truly cared about them. She talked about being intentional about making sure she noticed things like new haircuts or when a teacher's spouse or child is sick. She believes teachers need to be cared for due to the difficult work that comes with teaching at a high-need middle school.

Isabela and Mariela shared the challenges of working at high-need middle schools. Both teachers mentioned the high number of students living below the poverty line. They also mentioned teacher support from their principals as one of the contributing practices and identified it as the reason for teaching at their campuses. Both teachers contributed their love for teaching at their high-need campuses to their principals. They had respect for them and their ability to create a culture for learning and high expectations for students, staff, and parents. Both teachers respected their principals. They were leaders that enhanced individual performance by building teacher capacity. Organizational performance was enhanced by fostering a culture of high expectations through inclusion and collaboration. Teachers were treated like professionals and their efforts were acknowledged and celebrated.

Theme 2: Culture of Learning, Leading, and High Expectations

Both principals and their teachers held strong beliefs about the power of education because of the doors and opportunities it opened in their lives. Camila and Theresa valued teachers and their professional efforts to help students learn. It was evident in their leadership practices. If teachers were required to attend professional development, both principals made sure they were also in attendance. Both leaders were visible at district and staff professional development. As Mariela noted, Principal Theresa modeled expectations for staff and never asked teachers to do something she was not willing to do herself. Camila stated she was on a team with her teachers as she believed student success was dependent on teacher success.

Both Isabela and Mariela said their principals supported them by ensuring students followed the school code of conduct. Both campuses had high expectations for learning and behavior. One parent at Cesar Chavez gave the campus a five-star rating on Facebook and noted, *"Excelente escuela! La disciplina que se aplica es muy buena."* (Retrieved from Facebook™).

Both principals had high expectations for themselves, students, staff, and parents. Staff held each other accountable at both campuses and had systems in place for teams to meet and reflect on data and students. Decisions were made as a team and both principals knew each student individually. Additionally, teachers at both campuses had opportunities to lead and grow their capacity to enhance collective efficacy. Leadership at both campuses was not based on one individual. It was distributed among the entire staff at both campuses, as a team effort, or *gestión*.

Theme 3: Collaborative Culture

Both principals' passion for learning and their strong belief in education was not only something they practiced at school, but it also intersected with their personal lives as well. These beliefs impacted learning for all students as it was the foundation for high expectations and leading by

example. In Latino communities, families, value learning (*valorando el aprendizaje*) and Latino principals can use their deep roots in the community to reach families, like Principal Caballero did.

Principal Theresa's personal life also intersected with her professional identity, as she wanted staff to know who she was outside of school. She held a meet and greet at the beginning of every school year. This allowed staff the opportunity to get to know one another and introduce any new staff members. Theresa introduced her family so her staff could see they were alike in many ways. Like them, she was also a wife, mother, daughter, and friend. In this sense, the culture at both campuses was collaborative, where teachers and leaders learned about one another.

During Mariela's interview, she talked about Ms. Torres' faith. She stated Ms. Torres' faith was a huge part of leadership on campus and in the community. She respected Theresa. Mariela knew Theresa led Sunday school classes at church. She also knew her father died at a young age and yet Theresa still focused on school, graduated from college, and continued serving in different capacities.

Mariela and Isabela were committed to the mission and vision led by the principals at both campuses. They both stated Camila and Theresa supported teachers by modeling and setting expectations. They were visible in hallways and classrooms. They knew students by names and held meetings with parents when students were struggling with discipline issues. All four participants talked about knowing each student individually. It was apparent that decisions were made based on what was best for students at both campuses. Supporting teachers was a leading theme at both campuses. A collaborative culture was practiced at both campuses by students, staff, and parents where together they valued education.

Conclusion

The findings of this study are important to the field of public education as administrators and teachers work to create equitable learning opportunities for all students. The student population will continue growing more diverse, and educational reform mandates, school improvement initiatives, and principal programs must be centered around leadership for social justice. As such, it is important to highlight the leadership behaviors of successful Latino leaders and their contributions to closing the performance gap in high-need schools. According to Theoharis (2007), social justice for ELs cannot take place without inclusive services, and researchers like Field et al. (2007) state equity as two things: fairness and inclusion. For ELs, equity is acquired through leadership for social justice. As noted by middle school experts Balfanz et al. (2007), preventing school disengagement is critical. Responsive middle school principals combat this problem by developing relationships with students, teachers, and the community at large (Gale & Bishop, 2014).

Leadership studies identify principals as key players in closing the achievement gap for students (Marzano et al., 2005), and according to López (2018), "School leaders must also be deeply committed to social justice, advocacy, community empowerment, and social transformation if

they are to make a dent in improving the lives of Latinx youth and communities in this country” (p. 81). Camila and Theresa were both deeply committed to social justice, advocacy, community empowerment, and social transformation, and through their leadership, they created a culture of learning and equity for ELs.

Awareness of Middle Schoolers’ Needs

Awareness of middle schoolers’ needs is a concept that needs to be researched further in high-need middle schools. Like the Latino principals in Murakami and Torres-Arcadia’s (2019) research, the cross-national framework (Murakami & Torres-Arcadia, 2019) highlighted Latino principals in two high-need middle schools’ ability to enhance organizational performance by fostering teacher collaboration. Nonetheless, the concepts were too broad for a focus on middle schoolers in high-need schools. In working with middle schoolers, all four participants in this study recognized the challenges that come with the middle school transition. Both campuses included information for parents on their websites that were designed specifically for middle school students, and all four participants talked about the challenges that come with working at middle school. More importantly, they were all aware of the importance of making sure each child was on the right track before they went to high school.

Celebrating the Middle Years

Both campuses held campus-wide celebrations for students. They celebrated student performance, but they also celebrated different cultures. Both campuses’ social media pages included photos of the different festivities and family nights. In addition, both schools created soccer teams through clubs for middle schoolers. In many Latino communities, soccer is a symbol of pride (Messeri, 2008). At Dolores Huerta, Isabela was the girls’ soccer coach. They did not have an official school soccer team, but at the time of the interview, they were in the process of creating a soccer club. Isabela was excited about her new leadership endeavor. The photos at school-wide events included principals and teachers supporting students, parents, and staff outside the campus at student-centered events.

At the middle school level, relationships and school belonging are important for students. The relationships developed with teachers, peers, and principals play an important role in setting the stage for high school and post-secondary readiness. These case studies confirmed tenets from the cross-national framework that are critical to the social and emotional development as well as academic performance of Latino middle schoolers. More importantly, we learned how Latina principals enhance individual and organizational performance to foster a culture of learning and equity for Latino ELs in high-need schools.

All four participants were keenly aware of middle schoolers’ socio-emotional needs, and they perceived their roles as advocates and models for student success (Byrne-Jimenez & Méndez-Morse, 2016; Gale & Bishop, 2014). Furthermore, according to Gándara and Contreras (2009), support systems such as access to intervention programs, community-based programs, and emotional support are important concepts that must be in place for Latino ELs as they transition to challenging middle school years. According to a study by Gale and Bishop (2014),

they found three distinct challenges based on other studies that are applicable to middle school principals:

1. Awareness of the unique nature and needs of middle schoolers,
2. The variety of building configurations, and
3. An increasing awareness of the critical role the middle school years play in success later in life.

In this same study, Gale and Bishop (2014) found successful middle school principals placed a big emphasis on relationships. This includes relationships with staff, students, and the community. They also stated the teachers and staff in the building must be aware of the physical and emotional development phases of middle schoolers and not place an emphasis solely on academics. All middle schoolers go through rapid changes during this developmental stage in their lives. Principals who lead at the middle level require a unique set of skills, including energy and enthusiasm, to support students during a critical time in their educational journey (Gale & Bishop, 2014).

Implications for Practice

As the student population continues to grow more diverse, educational researchers identify case studies as a critical approach to looking for conditions and capacities that contribute to the explanation of the phenomenon (Schwandt & Gates, 2018). Okilwa and Barnett (2018) suggest implications for research on leadership and context include purposely sampling districts where a certain population of students is growing in schools at different levels (e.g., middle, secondary, K-12). Other implications include improving school leadership in vulnerable contexts such as high-need schools as this universal concern continues to grow (Barnett & Stevenson, 2015; Gurr et al., 2014; Medina et al., 2014; Murakami & Kearney, 2016).

Research on successful Latino principals in high-need middle school contexts is critical as we seek to understand the impact of leadership in challenging contexts (Lee & Hallinger, 2012). As noted by Ms. Caballero, “You can’t do this alone.” Principals in high-need contexts cannot take on the work of school improvement alone. Both Latino leaders in this study enhanced individual performance by empowering teachers. Theresa noted, “I want them (teachers) to know that I really care about them.” Their unique contribution to this study was their support of the principal-teacher relationship. According to Gale and Bishop (2014), relationships at the middle school level are the foundation of student engagement as students observe healthy relationships modeled by the adults on the campus. They also found responsive principals and teachers at the middle school level were informed and able to empathize with the vulnerable middle school stage (Gale & Bishop, 2014).

Teachers at both campuses attended professional development that was relevant to the needs of their students. This included physical movement at Cesar Chavez and student ambassadors at Dolores Huerta. This was possible because Ms. Caballero and Ms. Torres knew each teacher and each student. This was possible due to the number of middle schoolers, staffing, and the systems they had in place that distributed leadership and responsibility. They identified the

needs of the organization and aligned professional learning opportunities for teachers. Teachers applied their leadership skills as they presented what they learned at staff meetings. Camila and Theresa enhanced learning at their campuses by distributing leadership amongst teachers and supporting the principal-teacher relationship. These traits align with research by Bordas (2007), who found Latino leadership as collective and people-centered. It is recommended that middle school principals foster collaborative cultures by respecting and valuing teachers as professionals, encouraging them to take on leadership roles, and creating time for collaboration and input. Especially for teachers of middle schoolers, relationships with their principals, relationships with colleagues, and relationships with students are the foundation of success and equity (Gale & Bishop, 2014). Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015) suggest that relationships between principals and teachers are critical components of sustaining a collaborative learning environment where all members contribute to student success. Additionally, Price and Moolenaar (2015) found social interactions between principals and teachers contribute to the learning cultures in schools. Given the important role of teacher-student relationships in school engagement for Latino middle school students (Brewster & Bowen, 2004), it is imperative for principals and teachers to work together to foster a culture of learning and equity.

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Mentor Reflection

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Dr. Robles and I have known each other for over ten years. We first met before she began her doctorate when we were both serving on a nonprofit board for an organization that has a vision of *a Hispanic community that flourishes* and provides educational, leadership, and cultural opportunities for growth. Over the years, I became her instructor in educational leadership doctoral courses and then served on her dissertation committee. Since she has become an assistant professor at our institution, we have also traveled to conferences together and written a book chapter together. So, we had an established professional relationship that already contained a mentoring component when she began the process of writing the article for this special issue.

We first met on this project to discuss what this process could look like as she shaped her article and as I supported her. It was also useful to explore how participating in this process would influence her growth as a social justice scholar. I shared with her my meandering journey of connecting my passion for student success and educational equity to my professional work.

Without a mentor to guide me and encourage me to focus on my academic work, it took a lot of scattered attempts at finding my path to professional focus regarding my scholarship. I encouraged her to think through how each presentation, each research project, and each article or book chapter written would fit into her overall direction for who she wants to be as a scholar and who she would like to impact.

Alongside the larger philosophical conversation, we also looked at the specifics of this project, such as the timelines and expectations for submission of the article. It was an interesting conversation to talk through the guidelines provided for the article, including the call for proposals and the established deadlines to ensure we had a similar understanding of what needed to be accomplished by when and how we would communicate. In our circumstance it worked out well to send progress via email to review and then meet in person to discuss.

After establishing the goals and logistics, we had to explore what she was interested in writing about for the issue. As is the case with many junior faculty, she hadn't yet used her dissertation research to craft an article. The first step was envisioning which piece(s) of her dissertation she was interested in turning into an article. Next came the process of establishing the purpose, audience, and structure of the article. I believe this is a key piece in supporting someone as they continue to develop as a scholar. As we examine those ideas it serves to focus the conversation and allows for a back-and-forth dialogue that can move the planning stages to development more concrete steps to visualizing an outline for the article. Particularly, in this case, where she already had all the research and had written extensively about it in dissertation format, finding a focus for the article was necessary. For someone who hasn't had this experience, conceptualizing the process of taking a "slice" of the overall research and crafting an article can be daunting. I believe this is the case for many junior faculty who begin their

academic careers, especially if they lack guidance or support from a colleague or mentor who has already been down this road.

Once the preliminary planning was done, she began the process of writing. We checked in regarding the deadlines and progress during the writing process. However, during this period, timing tended to be an issue. Much of this happened during the summer, which tends to be a packed time for us both, making our preferred method of communication, discussing in person, difficult. I teach study abroad in the summer and do other traveling throughout. She does a lot of community work linked to student success and college preparation and then travels at the end of the summer.

We did not foresee the issues we would have sticking to our communication plan during this time. While we were able to communicate via email, we didn't have any of those rich conversations in person or via Zoom during the summer writing period as time zones and other responsibilities took precedence. I believe this is the part of the process that I would adjust for a future iteration with her or anyone else that I was mentoring. I think that it would be important to realistically look ahead to the times when we know communication will be limited and plan accordingly with timelines and expectations.

As I reflect on the process, in this situation the frontloaded process of planning and establishing a purpose not only for writing the article but linking it to overall professional growth was the most important piece of the mentoring process. As Dr. Robles continues to grow not only as an advocate and community collaborator for social justice in education but also as a social justice scholar, the process of envisioning her work and place as a contributor to the larger academic community is key. This mentoring process for this article served to build that understanding by having directed, intentional conversations linked to the writing process.

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